

THE MOST THRILLING TALE OF THE WILD WEST EVER WRITTEN!

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ALWAYS-ON-HAND: OR, The Sportive Sport of the Foot-Hills

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DICK," "A HARD CROWD," "THE KID-
NAPPER," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A BOLD BLOW.

"WHURROO, tha-ur! Kape it a-goin, b'yr
Tappity-tappity-tappity-tap!
"Hyah! Hya-a-ah!"
Shuffle! shuffle! shuffle!
"Now ye have it—see ye kape it!"
Tappity-tap! Tappity-tap!
"Gib dis hyar chile room!"
Shuff! shuff! shufflety! shuff!
"Owld Oirland furiver! Balleyhoolagan to
the fore!"
Tappity-tap-tap! Tap! tap! tap!
"Cl'ar de ribber fur dese hyar gun-boats.
'Fore de Lo'd, I's a-comin'!"

When wanted, I am always on hand! Ha! ha! ha!"

Shufflety-shuff! shuff! shuff!

"Wade in thar, you son o' darkness. I've got a saw-buck up on them bandy legs."

"All right, massa. Dat saw-buck's all hunk, fur sure."

"I'll peel ye, if it hain't."

"Shake them thar brogans lively! My pile's up on you! Ye shall swim in whisky if ye hold yer own; but not a drop if you let Sambo git away with ye."

"Divil swape the nagur that kin git away wid Bryan o' Ballyhoolagan!"

"You Irish! better shut up dat 'ar clam-trap 'fore you git me fly-blowed."

"Stow yer chin-music, an' 'tend strictly to business. Now, boys, all together!"

Pat! pat! pat! pat!

A scene of wildest hilarity, as if Puck, the mischievous sprite, had possessed a score of satyrs.

A long, low-ceiled room, with rude tables and benches nailed to the walls, and at the further end a bar, displaying an array of decanters, long-necked black bottles and goblets.

In the middle of the sanded floor a "Frenchman from Cork" and an American citizen from Dixie had abandoned themselves to the wildest rivalry of break-down and jig.

Around were grouped perhaps a score of such specimens of humanity as only the Wild West has produced.

Men with beards like tangled brushwood and hair that must have forgotten the very name of comb—woolen shirts that were never washed until their multitudinous insect life or filth became no longer endurable—breeches so begrimed with grease and dirt that they might almost have been mistaken for leather—"stogie" boots, yellow with clay, whose sanctity no brush had ever violated, as rough as oak-bark and as tough as horn.

Only one thing about them was ever cleaned—the universal "six-shooter!"

These men were patting "Juba" in time with the dancers, who were vying with each other in the production of the most grotesque attitudes and the wildest antics.

On that circle of brutal faces was depicted a ferocious eagerness, which might be received as a fit prefiguration of the mirth of Satan's imps. In their rage these men were devils—in their sport they were devils still.

Oaths the most blasphemous burdened every sentence that fell from their lips, and the epithets with which they addressed each other, in their jocularity, were foul beyond description.

The sport was at its height. The room rung with hoarse laughter, shouts of encouragement, challenges to bet, and criticisms more forcible than elegant.

Hibernia, with his arms akimbo, his hat (the band confining the traditional "stump of a pipe") set on one side, and his long and bristling upper lip bowed by a confident smile, was shaking leg in a style that would have caused Terpsichore some surprise.

Dixie had cast his hat on the door in the abandon of enjoyment. His rolling eyes threatened to leap from their sockets. His grin would have made an alligator envious. How his arms and legs retained their attachment to his body was a miracle.

This scene was unexpectedly interrupted by a vigorous thumping in the vicinity of the door, and an irascible voice calling.

"Pat! Sam! You infernal scoundrels! What are you doing here? Must I run all over the world for you every time the stage stops? Confound you! I'll give you a drubbing each, if I am annoyed in this way again. Come out of here, I say!"

The effect on the dancers was magical.

As if operated by the same spring, which had suddenly broken, both stopped at the same instant. Pat straightened his hat on his head, while Sam snatched his up from the floor, and both crouched and drew near to each other in comical dismay.

Muttered Pat:

"Divil swape the loike av us!"

While Sam cried:

"'Fore de Lo'd! Dar's Massa Haveland!"

With looks of not pleased surprise, the other occupants of the room turned to see who had so unceremoniously interrupted their sport.

In the doorway stood an elderly gentleman, the cut and cleanliness of whose garments showed that he was from "the States."

His face was purple with choler, and his eyes fairly snapped between the beetling, grizzled brows. In his hand he carried a heavy cane, with which he again thumped the floor;

"Pat!"

"Yis, yer honor."

Pat doffed his hat and held it in both hands, with an air of deprecating humility.

"Fetch your red-headed carcass out of here instantly!" commanded the old gentleman.

"Yis, yer honor," said Pat, respectfully.

Sam, who had crouched behind his fellow-culprit, out of sight of the old gentleman, leered around at the crowd with a pantomime of a "hyah! hyah!" which made him look not unlike the pumpkin with a candle in it which boys call "Jack o'-lantern." At the same time he patted his own woolly head to draw attention to the opprobrious reference which had been made to Pat's "sorrel-top."

"Red Head! Hyah! hyah!" he whispered, just loud enough for the Irishman to hear him.

"May the divil fly away wid me!" began the Celt, below his breath, shaking his fist slyly behind him at the chuckling negro.

But a sharp interruption came.

"Sam! you black rascal!"

Sambo, who from enjoyment of his comrade's discomfiture had felt a strong inclination to roll on the floor, was now "fetch-up with a round turn."

The sudden change of his countenance from the most extravagant contortions of mirth to the sober decorum of deep humility and contrition was ludicrous in the extreme.

"Yes, Massa Haveland," he said, in lamblike accents.

"Whurroo! you black beast!" muttered Pat behind his hat, and his ecstasy was ill-concealed.

"Come out of there! If you loiter an instant, I'll use your woolly pate for a football!"

"Woolly pate!" repeated Pat, with malicious relish.

"I's a-comin', Massa Haveland," said Sam, meekly.

But he gave his tormentor a sly kick on the leg, and muttered:

"Wait till de ha'r's done growin' on you' teef, 'fore you crow, Irish!"

At this juncture a burly ruffian stepped between the persons who evidently bore the relationship of master and servants, and said:

"Hold on hyar! I reckon we'll have a hand in this hyar leetle game. That mill hain't off that way, nohow ye kin fix it—eh, fellers?"

"Yer right, boss!" assented one worthy, while a second vouchsafed:

"Ef our fun's g'wine to be sp'iled in this hyar way, I allow we'll know the reason why."

"Sam! Pat! Come out of there this instant!" called the irate old gentleman.

"Sam! Pat!" mimicked the borderman, "ef you budge a step, I'll let daylight clean through you!"

And he drew a "six-shooter," cocked it, and took deliberate aim at the nearest, which happened to be the gentleman of Celtic extraction.

"Pard, I'm with ye!"

"Hyar, too!"

"Ye don't leave me out o' this leetle game!"

"I assist."

"You hyear my gentle voice?"

"Ex-cuse me!"

With this and similar expressions, nearly half the crowd drew their weapons and pointed them at their luckless entertainers of a moment since.

Before this formidable array Bryan o' Ballyhoolagan "wilted"—in other words, crumpling his hat between his hands and canting his head to one side, somewhat after the manner of a bashful child, he resorted instinctively to blarney.

"Ah! sure, gintlemen, yer honors 'll turn thim things another way! Faith, yez wouldn't be afther hurtin' two poor divils that niver done yez a hand's turn o' harrum, at all, at all! I'll swear it's a good joke ye're playin'. Ha! ha! ha!"

His mechanical laugh was as hoarse as the bark of a jackal, while the grimace which he intended for a propitiatory smile was ludicrous in its white-lipped fear. Every muscle in his body seemed to cringe, and his knees fairly smote together.

As for Sambo, he dropped on his marrowbones, and clasped his hands in agonized supplication, shutting his eyes tightly, to hide the death he dared not look upon.

"Fo' de lub ob de bressed Lo'd, gemmen," he pleaded in a quavering voice, "don't shoot dis hyar chile! He ain't fit to die, nohow! De debil shore to git him pore soul, ef you cut him down like de grass ob de fields. Leabe dis sinnah to de Lo'd's own time, an' he'll speak a good word fur ye in de New Jerus'lum, shore!"

"What is the meaning of this outrage?" demanded old Mr. Haveland, hotly.

"Boss," said the ruffian who had first interfered, "thar's money up on this shake-leg mill, and it ain't off, you bet, till the thing's decided, one way or t'other. You hear me?—Spanish Dave, the Handsome Man! I hails from Idaho, Golden City, Caraboo, an' surroundin' country!"

This speech was delivered with a swaggering bravado that would have become a bandit in his mountain fastness. The title of the "Handsome Man" had been assumed by the fellow in that spirit of sardonic irony sometimes evinced by monsters of ugliness who seem to take a fierce, bitter pride in their disfigurement. A livid scar running from the left temple across the nose, to the chin on the opposite side of the face, made Spanish Dave more fiendish than handsome.

"And do you presume to interfere between me and my servants?" said Mr. Haveland, his heavy stick trembling in his hand, as if it itched to try conclusions with Spanish Dave's thick skull.

"Oh, blow you and your servants!"

That insult capped the climax.

The hot-headed old gentleman's wrath exploded like nitro-glycerine.

By a lightning stroke of his heavy walking-stick Spanish Dave was stretched stunned and bleeding on the floor.

Then a man on whose temples age had hung her silver tenuity, armed only with a cudgel, faced a mob, every man of which was armed to the teeth with murderous bowie and "six-shooter."

CHAPTER II.

THE SPORTIVE SPORT.

For an instant the boldness of the act held every one spell-bound. They could scarcely realize that the dare-devil had been indeed felled to the earth.

Then a roar of fury rung through the room, and dark visages scowled black menace.

Mr. Haveland had advanced a few steps into the room, and now from either side partisans of the fallen ruffian leaped forward to cut off his retreat at the door.

In an instant he found himself surrounded by a mob to whom murder was but a pastime.

"Pat! Sam!" he called, standing on the defensive, and holding his cane in readiness.

The opening of the crowd had brought the master and servants within the same circle.

In an agony of terror, Sam crept forward until he could clutch the skirts of his master's coat.

"Fo' de Lo'd's sake, Massa Haveland, don't let 'em hurt dis chile, dat's done skeered to deff! Oh! de good Lo'd sabe dis pore sinnah f'om de raff ob de Philistines, an' he be good all de rest ob him days, shore!—'clar' to goodness, he will!"

Equally terrified, valiant Bryan o' Balleyhoolagan had the wit to see that the fury of the mob was wholly directed toward his master; and having no relish for exposing his craven hide unnecessarily to the danger of perforation, he sought to lose himself among the crowd of assailants.

But his meditated retreat was detected and frustrated by one of the bordermen, who offset some of their vices by a healthful contempt for poltroonery.

"Git back thar, fur a beggarly sneak that 'ud desart his pards when they're up to the ears in dirty water!" was the indignant denunciation.

And by a vigorous kick in the rear Bryan o' Balleyhoolagan was hurled forward upon his knees.

"Hold on, pards. Don't sp'ile my meat," cried Spanish Dave, who had now so far collected his scattered wits as to perceive the menacing attitude of the crowd toward the man who had knocked him down.

With some difficulty the ruffian got on his feet, and stood

crouching like a tiger about to spring, and glaring fierce hatred and gloating malignity at his intended victim.

His face was purple with rage. His eyes were bloodshot. His huge form quivered in every nerve.

Drawing his bowie-knife from his boot-leg, he ran his finger along the edge and tried its point, while he grinned in sardonic, ghoulish glee.

"Ha ha! Ha-ha! You knocked me down, did ye? You knocked Spanish Dave off his pins! Ha-ha! Ha-ha!"

His short, mechanical laugh was blood curdling, as he advanced upon the unarmed man with slow, creeping steps.

By that murderous assault, the silver-haired old hero must inevitably have been beaten down to death, but for a timely intervention.

From the doorway came a voice:

"When wanted, I am always on hand! Ha! ha! ha!"

Every eye flashed in the direction of the door, and then those who had been most prominent in the assault, turned away in evident disgust.

Their chagrin found expression in low mutterings.

"The Sportive, by thunder!"

"This jig's up!"

"The hull doggoned thing's knocked in the head!"

"Leash yer bull-dogs."

"He don't stand no foolishness."

"I pass!"

"He kin rake the pile, for me."

"Dave's got a yarthquake to mount this time."

As for Spanish Dave, though he turned pale, he did not put his up knife.

A dull glare of fear and hatred came into his eyes, supplanting their murderous glitter of a moment before.

Checking all motion, he stared fixedly in the direction whence the mocking voice had proceeded.

Seeing that the attention of the bully was now diverted from him, old Jasper Haveland turned to see what manner of man had come so opportunely and so effectively to his aid.

In the doorway stood a man of perhaps five feet ten in stature, symmetrical in build, with muscular limbs, tapering at the extremities, appended to a trunk whose slender waist and deep chest indicated a compact yet strong organism.

In feature he was comely, a gracefully curving mustache giving him a rather aristocratic appearance.

He had the clear and confident bearing of a man who had never known a fear.

He did not affect the long hair and sombrero-like hat with which the "Knights of the Plains" not infrequently seek to distinguish their persons, in unconscious imitation of old England's cavaliers; nor in his dress was there anything "loud."

His attitude, however, was evidently studied for effect.

He stood resting his right wrist in the hollow of the left, so that the open palm of his left hand flanked the blue steel barrel of the revolver which he held in his right. Across the palm was traced the word "*Always!*" Its significance was evident—"Always on Hand."

Along the barrel of the pistol ranged an eye which was piercing, notwithstanding the twinkle of mocking mirth with which it rested on the startled bully.

"Well, what do you want?" demanded Spanish Dave, with a fierce oath.

The newly-arrived laughed lightly, and replied in clear, pleasing tones:

"Oh, I'm in one of my playful moods to-day. I saw that you were having a little fun, and, in my sportive way, I thought I'd just drop in on you and take a hand."

"Well, you kin just drop out again! I reckon I'm playin' a lone hand in this hyar game."

"But there's always two hands. And I've got the lone hand against you, seeing these gentlemen have dropped out," replied the other pleasantly. "I hold the 'little joker,' as you perceive, and—in short, I order you up!"

Although the "Sportive Sport," as he was called, smiled as engagingly as ever, there was an unmistakable light in his eye. He meant to be obeyed!

"Hold!" cried stout old Jasper Haveland. "I am not very well versed in the nomenclature of card-playing, but I know one thing—you'll not play a lone hand against this mob while I've muscle to wield this stick!"

"Bless you, sir, this is no mob," laughed the Sportive Sport. "These are the sovereign citizens of Denver and vicinity. There is no occasion for cudgels, and violence of that sort. We are a law-abiding people, sir—that is to say,

when the law is laid down and backed up by a man who means business. Take me, for instance, I am generally accounted a very, humorous person; but if I am as playful, I am also as harmless, as a kitten.

While the Sportive Sport was speaking to Mr. Haveland, keeping his eye however on Spanish Dave, the latter was addressed by one of his pals in a low tone.

"Throw off, Dave," he advised. "Thar's no use playin' hog. He's got the drop on ye this round."

"I'm yer solid friend; an' I says it ain't the longest-eared cuss that knows how to squeal an' come ag'in," added another.

"I've got to slit the gullet o' that old bloke, first!" said Spanish Dave, grinding an oath of intense hatred between his teeth.

"You'll git salted!" urged the first admonitor.

"Come! come!" here interrupted the Sportive Sport, "I feel a tickling sensation creeping along my back-bone, and when I laugh my fingers always twitch."

As he ceased speaking he began a spasmodic catching of breath, as if he were trying to repress a laugh.

The effect was well calculated to awe any one who was looking straight into the polished tube where death was held in leash only by a hair trigger.

Spanish Dave turned a muddy gray with rage and fear.

With a sullen oath, he put his knife back into his boot-leg.

"You've got me this time," he said; "but every dog has his day."

"Then you'll be sure to have yours!" was the quick and meaning retort of the Sportive Sport. "Ha! ha! ha! That's one of my little jokes. Good, is it not?"

"Some day the fun 'll be let out o' you all at once!" growled Spanish Dave.

Without heeding him further the Sportive Sport turned to the barkeeper.

"Landlord, I reckon I've got some friends in this crowd; and, like myself, my friends are ready to smile. Boys, here's something for you to smile at."

And he tossed some coins on the bar.

In response to this piece of liberality the room rung with a lusty cheer.

"Step up, gentlemen; don't be bashful. Johnny 'll give you something that will make you laugh clear down to your toe-nails and up again."

"Three cheers and a tigah fur the Sportive Sport!" cried a voice,

And again the room rung.

In the general enthusiasm, half a dozen of the most villainous-looking had no share. Headed by Spanish Dave, they withdrew from the room, which being observed, the "tigah" turned into a yell of derision.

Spanish Dave had scowled blackly at Mr. Haveland and the Sportive Sport, as he passed them. Paying no heed to the evident scoffing of the friends of the latter, the discomfited bully and his followers swung themselves into their saddles and set out toward the foot-hills at a sweeping gallop.

CHAPTER III.

STELLA.

A MOMENT later Mr. Haveland emerged from the saloon in company with the Sportive Sport, followed by the indirect cause of all the trouble.

Sam looked subdued, and his eyes still rolled apprehensively from side to side.

Bryan o' Balleyhoolagan's fears appeared in an air of swaggering bravado, which he had assumed, now that he felt safe. One would have inferred that he was the hero of the occasion.

Mr. Haveland was speaking.

"Now let me thank you for your assistance. Your arrival was very timely."

"Oh! when there's any fun going on, I'm always on hand," was the light reply.

"May I ask you your name, sir?"

But before the Sportive Sport could reply, his attention was chained by a ringing, silvery voice.

"Oh, Guardie, what has happened?"

And a young girl, whose plump cheeks were fitter habitations for blushes and dimples, than pallid fears, ran up and clasped the old man's arm.

Then her blue eyes, their wonted merry twinkle supplanted by apprehensive questioning, sought the face of the Sportive Sport.

As the latter gazed upon her fair brow and sunny hair and pouting lips, not so red as was their wont, yet passingsweet, for all that, in their dewy freshness, a deep flush mantled his face from chin to temple, and his eye, that could cow the mountain lion unabashed, fell before the gaze of the simple girl.

"Pet," said old Jasper Haveland, "you have to join with me in thanking this gentleman for my life. This is my ward—I beg your pardon, sir, I am not yet apprised of your name."

With those innocent blue eyes, beaming with quick gratitude and perhaps admiration, fixed questioningly on his face, the Sportive Sport felt constrained to speak.

"My name is Edward—"

But here he paused. A sort of reckless bitterness and defiance seemed to seize upon him.

He drew himself erect. His eyes flashed. He seemed to shake himself free from the abashing influence the girl had thrown about him.

He looked not at her, but at her guardian, as he replied in his wonted off-hand lightness of manner, dashed with a touch of cynicism:

"What's in a name? They call me the Sportive Sport. Don't make too much of my little service, stranger. They're a lot of hounds that cringe at the crack of the whip."

"You will let me thank you all the same?" said the girl. "I have heard of the danger that threatened dear old Guardie, and of your brave conduct."

She extended her hand with that impulsive cordiality and trustfulness which is so engaging in a beautiful woman, whose armor of defense is her innocence.

Once more the Sportive Sport flushed scarlet, as he felt her soft, warm hand in his.

With a coy smile, canting her head a little to one side with most bewitching grace, she asked:

"Will you not tell me your real name, in exchange for mine? I want to think of you as a friend, and it will be so strange to know you only by so odd an appellation as the Sportive Sport. My name is Stella Raymond."

For the third time the man blushed deeply. A moment he hesitated, and then said, in a constrained voice:

"You may think of me—if you care to waste thought on a fellow like me—as Edward Gary."

With a slight frown, he added:

"Perhaps I have as good a right to that name as any other!"

The girl felt repulsed by his manner.

Flushing in her turn, she withdrew the hand she had given so frankly.

"All aboard!" cried the stage-driver, curbing his impatient leaders until they reared almost erect.

"May the devil fly away wid the hindmost!" cried Bryan o' Balleyhoolagan, as a challenge to his sable fellow.

"Hi! T'ought he catch dis nig, fur sure!" was the reply.

And their volatile natures shaking off all traces of fear, the moment the danger was past, they raced for the "hearse" and scrambled to their perches on top in high glee.

More soberly, Mr. Haveland and Stella took their seats inside, the latter having parted rather coldly with the man to whom her gratitude had at first gone forth with all the impulsiveness of a warm, unaffected heart.

The stage-driver cracked his whip with an artistic flourish. The leaders curveted spiritedly. The swaying vehicle rolled away in a cloud of dust.

The Sportive Sport stood with folded arms gazing after it. An unusual gravity sat upon his face, and his deep chest rose and fell as if his breathing were somewhat labored.

For perhaps half an hour he stood thus without motion, until the coach was a mere speck far out on the plains. Then arousing with a start he leaped into the saddle, and, leaving Denver in his rear, followed the coach toward Golden City.

CHAPTER IV.

INSIDE THE "HEARSE."

BUT within the coach are persons whom we must now introduce to the reader.

First comes an elderly lady in a bombazine dress, with a

little shawl tied across her ample bosom, and her hands incased in isle-thread gloves. Her head-covering consisted of a checked gingham sunbonnet, kept in shape by strips of pasteboard inserted in the sides, to which was superadded a thick green veil, through which her spectacles were just discernible.

Her bandbox, parasol and reticule, of the most antiquated patterns, had come to be regarded by all the other occupants of the coach as the demons of a nightmare.

On the seat beside her sat a martyr who deserved canonization for the patience with which he endured pokes from her parasol when the old lady fidgeted, or held her band-box when she looked in her reticule for snuff or lumps of crust sugar with peppermint dropped on them; or hunted under the seats and in the corners of the coach for lost articles which she let slip from her reticule during her fitful dozes.

Anybody but the Rev. Thomas à Becket Wharton would long since have slyly strangled the old lady, or committed suicide.

Mrs. Kimball was in a state of great excitement when the stage started.

"La! Mr. Haveland," she cried, "they do tell me that you was e'ena'most killed by them vagabones that come out o' that saloon, yonder."

"It was nothing, madam," replied stout old Jasper Haveland, thrusting his hands deep in his pockets, and looking with determined fierceness out of the window.

"It's gi'n me *such* a turn! (Ah, Mr. Wharton, you're so good. If you'll jest mind that band-box—oh, Lud! don't turn it upside down! Money can't mend what you'll mar if you hain't keeful. There—so. Them peppermints does me so much good—you don't know.) Air you badly hurt, Mr. Haveland?"

"Not at all, madam."

"Oh, not hurt? But did he really shoot at you?—the ruffian!"

"No."

"No? Perhaps—(oh, Mr. Wharton! If you'll be such a good soul! Ah, thank you! Have you got 'em all—spectacle-case, darnin'-cotton, Bible—I set great store by my Bible, Mr. Wharton—an apple and two doughnuts—was there any of the snuff spilled?—it's *such* a comfort to an old woman—a thimble, a stick o' lickerish—it's good fur colds—and there's that bottle o' liniment—I don't know what I *would* do, if I was to lose that—it cures cuts and burns and stun-bruises and the like; and, what with the rheumatiz in my old j'int, and the stiff neck I always get when I sleep in a draught, I'd be just lost without it—and there was a razor, Mr. Wharton—I use it fur rippin' and cuttin' my corns—it belonged to poor, dear Kimball, that's dead and gone, poor man, these twenty years—ah, many's the time I've seen him before the lookin'-glass with his galluses down to his slipper-heels, screwin' his face this way and that way, and scrapin' and swearin' because that razor didn't cut—he was a profane man, Mr. Wharton—that was my only sorrow. Ah, thank you! You're so good.) I beg your pardon, Mr. Haveland. You were sayin' that the bloodthirsty ruffian did not shoot at you. No doubt he was afraid you'd shoot first."

"I have nothing to shoot with, madam," was the short reply.

"Eh? Don't you carry a pistol?"

"No."

"Nor no we'pons o' no sort?"

"No."

"Oh my! I feel as if I should faint!"

"My dear madam, pray be calm!" urged the minister, rather nervously, haunted by a vision of the old lady swooning in his arms.

"Oh, Mr. Wharton, you will protect me—surely you will?"

"Madam, I should be recreant to my trust did I not succor those in distress, whether spiritual or physical. But I see no cause for present apprehension."

"Then you are fully armed?"

"I madam!" cried the pastor, in dismay—"I carry the instruments of death? No, mine is the ministry of life—of the life everlasting which passeth all understanding."

"But the Death Riders? If they attack us, I've got all my money in my stockin'. Oh, we'll all be killed—I know we will!"

The little minister turned pale.

"I am a soldier of the Prince of Peace," he said, meekly. "Of this world's goods I have nothing that the spoiler would covet. For the rest, He without whom not a sparrow falls holds us all in the hollow of his hand."

But this dependence on supernatural intervention met with little favor among the other occupants of the coach. They were men who knew the value of hard knocks dealt by earthly hands, with weapons that were palpable to the senses.

The discussion of the Death Riders, a band of outlaws who infested the foothills, became general, when:

"*Golden City!*" came in lusty tones from the driver! his whip cracked like a pistol-shot; the horses broke into a wild gallop for a spurt of perhaps a quarter of a mile of home-stretch; and the coach was brought up in grand style.

Here terminated the *progress* of most of the "Pilgrims," Jasper Haveland, his ward and servants, the Rev. Mr. Wharton and Mrs. Kimball alone going on to Idaho.

The sun had already disappeared behind the mountain crests, but out over the plains the moon, nearly at the full, hung upon the horizon.

And now a strange whim seized the old lady; nothing would do but that she must be perched on top of the coach to see the mountain scenery by moonlight.

With rather grim delight at the prospect of getting rid of her, Jasper Haveland encouraged her to persevere, and even went so far as to procure a step-ladder, and assisted her in her ascent.

With many a groan and plaint, and much gasping for breath, and a thousand and one anxious injunctions with regard to the precious bandbox and reticule and parasol, she was finally bestowed beside Bryan O' Balleyhoolagan and Julius Cæsar Apollonius Griggs, who received her with enthusiasm. The driver bit a ten-cent plug of tobacco half in two in silent rage.

Again the stage started, and settling himself in a comfortable position, old Jasper Haveland began a growl depreciatory of womankind in general and Mrs. Kimball in particular.

"Tut! tut! you dear old Guardie," laughed his ward. "Where's your gallantry?"

"Well, I detest—" began the crusty old gentleman.

"Oh, no, you do not detest anybody or any thing. For all you're grumbly and grouty, you have just the biggest, kindest heart in all the world. When poor mamma died, without a friend in the world, who but you would have taken me, a wee, helpless thing, and you an old bachelor, distracted by a lazy housekeeper and pilfering servants?"

"Do you suppose I'd stand by and see the rabble send you to the almshouse?"

"No, you dear old chestnut—all prickly burr outside and sweetmeat within!—but you took me and have been better to me than any father, in return for which I laugh at you and tease the life out of you."

There was a touch of tenderness in the girl's voice, and her laughing eyes had a suspicion of tears.

The old gentleman seemed afraid of betraying emotion.

"Well! well! don't make a fuss about it!" he said, nervously. "No doubt, there are worse women than you, if one were to look for them."

At that the girl laughed merrily.

"And there's your brother," she added. "Who but such an honest old soul as you would think of rummaging all the Rocky Mountain country to hunt him up to give him his share of the fortune derived from that patch of rocky land that wasn't worth sixpence before the oil wells were started on it?"

"And great thanks I'll get for my pains, no doubt!" growled Mr. Haveland.

But thinking of the brother whom he had not seen, and had heard about only indirectly and at long intervals, for the past quarter of a century, he softened; and gradually the girl talked him into a good-humor.

By this time they were in a pocket in the mountains, and out of the night came the stern command:

"HALT!"

There was a scream from the old lady.

Next was heard the voice of Bryan o' Balleyhoolagan:

"Howly Mother pectect us! We're lost intirely!"

Then Julius Cæsar Apollonius Griggs took the word:

"Fo' de Lo'd high golly!—de debil's got dis sinnah shore!"

Lastly came the voice of Cariboo Tom, the stage-driver:

"You bet your bottom dollar, boss, we'll halt right smart! Ef it's all the same to you, ye may p'int them little play-things in another direction. I don't keer a cuss fur my own hide, ye onderstand, but the horses is skeery. Gents, I reckon we're yours to command."

The horses had been drawn back on their haunches, and the coach brought to a standstill with a jerk.

Now a party of masked horsemen gathered about the coach.

The DEATH RIDERS were at hand.

CHAPTER V.

MISS NANCE.

WE will now, with the reader's permission, transfer the scene to a saloon in Idaho.

The edifice, of unpainted deal boards, laid no claim to architectural beauty. The signboard over the door, evidently the work of an amateur, bore the inscription:

"FREE AND EASY,

BY CALIFORNY SAL."

Because of a certain acerbity of temper, the proprietress was more familiarly known as the "Hell-cat." When she was "in one of her tantrums," with her black eyes flashing, her white teeth gleaming like fangs, her brunette complexion turned to a muddy gray, and her fingers crooked like claws, the appellation seemed not inappropriate.

The night of the day on which our story opens had just closed in, when several men might have been seen lurking about Californy Sal's Free and Easy, seeking the shadows of the building and neighboring trees in preference to the moonlight.

"The Hell-cat's off duty," whispered one, peering in at a window.

"I reckon she's had one of her tornadoes, and is laid up fur repairs," was the response. "But Miss Nance is to the fore, and she's almost as bad to buckle ag'in' if every-thing ain't square."

"Thar's our meat, as quiet as a lamb. Curse him! we'll spile his beauty some before we're through with him."

Looking in at the window to discover the subjects of the foregoing dialogue, the observer would have seen a saloon differing in no respect in its appointments and occupancy from those common to the mountain country.

Behind the bar was a damsel with a frame more muscular than delicate, a very rubicund face, eyes of a faded blue fringed by white eyelashes, and hair that even a very deeply-infatuated lover would have hesitated to call auburn.

Among her customers was a short, thick-set man, whom the prowler on the outside had regarded with a black scowl of murderous hatred while designating him as "our meat."

In the corner of the room furthest from the bar sat an old bummer, whose blood-shot, watery eyes, pendulous nether lip and palsied frame, clad in its garb of rags, bore terrible witness of the depth to which dissipation may sink its victim.

Sitting in a cringing attitude, starting apprehensively at every movement made by the occupants of the room, he gazed with a pitiful wistfulness at the drinkers, and watched the bar-maid with a deprecating appeal, as if her will shut him out from the heaven of his imagining.

This wreck of manhood was known as "Old Red Eye," and was generally conceded to be the worst pill in the box.

Presently he saw a drinker turn from the bar, leaving perhaps a tablespoonful of liquor in his glass. Then a terrible struggle of hope and fear assailed the shattered frame with an ague-fit.

Might he get the liquor which every fiber of his poisoned body craved as if it were elixir from heaven, or would the inexorable hand of the bar-maid rinse out the glass before he could get to it?

Intense longing overcame his fears; and rising with difficulty, he crossed the room with a shambling gait.

His weak eyes vacillated between the face of the bar-maid and the glass in which his hopes centered, with an insinuating smile for the woman, if she were to glance up and detect him, and for the liquor that fierce eagerness of craving with which a starving wretch looks upon food.

The woman saw him, in spite of his cautious approach, and called out sharply:

"Phil, what air yeou doin' round hyer?"

The shock of this challenge nearly threw the besotted

wretch off his balance. Trembling until his knees fairly smote together, he pleaded in a whining voice:

"Nance, I'm thirsty! A drop of water—only a drop of water!"

"Hain't I told you to stay away from hyer?"

"Yes, Nance—yes."

"Then why in Cain don't you mind?"

"I will—ah—yes, I will—"

While speaking the old bummer had been edging nearer the glass. He now seized it with a hand so tremulous with eagerness and fear that he could scarcely convey it to his lips.

He drained the glass and then set it down, with a smile as cringing as the fawning of a spaniel.

"Now you jest git!" was Nance's terse, if not elegant, injunction.

"Yes, Nance. Thankee, Nance! You ain't so hard on me, my girl, as she is. Thankee, Nance. I'll remember ye fur it."

Old Red Eye shambled back to his corner, holding his tattered hat between his hands, and bobbing his head at every step, and mumbling his gratitude.

Nance followed him with her eye, and if her look was not compassionate, at least it was not harsh.

At this moment a rasping voice from somewhere in the inner regions of the house was heard calling:

"Nance!"

The bar-maid knit her brows, but gave no other indication that she heard the voice.

To her customers, however, the voice was familiar, and they looked at her with awakening interest, as if surprised at her neglect to respond to the call.

After an interval of perhaps ten seconds the voice was raised again, with no slight accession of impatience in its tones.

"Nance!"

Nance muttered something to herself, and dashed a glass into the rinsing-bucket viciously, but still replied not.

The spectators began to exchange glances.

Nance flashed her eye over the crowd, as if to see if any one dared to grin.

As they met her challenging glance, every eye fell.

It was plain that all stood somewhat in awe of her.

Once more the voice was heard—now in the full tones of indignant command:

"NANCE, I SAY!"

"D'YE THINK I'M DEEF?" roared Nance in return, at the top of her voice.

The crowd of rude men held their breath. Not one of them would have dared to brave the Hell-cat like this.

In speaking of her, one "who knew how it was himself" had once remarked:

"You hyear me, pards—a man's a man. When he knocks you down, if ye don't want to fight, ye kin pick yerself up an' crawfish; but this screachin', bitin', clawin' tornader an' wildcat rolled into one—Fur rocks, fellers, I pass! I reckon ef she got clean r'iled at a galoot, the pieces she'd leave wouldn't be big enough fur fish-bate!"

This opinion was generally concurred in; and now all waited, half expecting that Nance would be annihilated for her bravado.

Imagine their surprise when the response came in a whining voice, as if the speaker were having recourse to tears:

"You might as well be, you sassy, lazy, good-fur-nothin' trollop! fur all the heed you pay—an' me a-layin' hyer as sick as a hoss, an' can't raise hand nor foot!"

Could the Hell-cat shed tears? No one had ever thought of her in that connection before.

"I'll come when I get ready," was Nance's ungracious reply.

She rinsed and arranged the remaining glasses and wiped off her bar, with an air which indicated that she meant to take her time. With equal deliberation she pulled down her sleeves and buttoned them at the wrist.

"I expect I'll have to lay hyer till I rot!" the impatient invalid was heard to say.

"You may rot, fur all me!" muttered Nance.

As if satisfied with this resistance of the Hell-cat's authority, she now raised her voice, calling angrily:

"Rooty!"

"Ya—a—a!" came the response—a sleepy yawn.

"Where be ye, ye little ground-hog?"

"Hyer I be, Nance."

And a bundle of dirty rags, rolled up and tucked away in a corner under the bar became animated, straightened itself out, rose on end, adjusted itself with a shake, and discovered a shock-headed boy, with eyes so painfully crossed that it made one dizzy to look at them, and with the dirtiest face on record.

"Where's your manners, ye little pig? Who air ye callin' 'Nance?' " demanded that offended damsel, indignantly. "I meant to say, Miss Nance," apologized Rooty, with due humility.

"That's better. Now wake up hyer, ur I'll souse ye in that bucket. D'ye hyer?"

"Yes'm," replied Rooty, rubbing his eyes with his grimy paws.

"I want you to tend bar while I go see what the madam's been yellin' her head off fur the last half-hour fur. D'ye onderstand?"

And she seized him of the dirty face by the shoulder, and shook him vigorously.

"Yes'm," again replied Rooty, winking his eyes hard, to show that he was really awake and attentive.

"It'll be another half-hour before you come," was the invalid's plaintive interposition.

"Oh, shet up yer yawp!" enjoined Miss Nance.

Then addressing Rooty, she went on:

"Thar don't go no trust over this bar, ye onderstand. Every galoot that wants to swig bug-juice in this shebang plants his two bits on that mahogany before he gets a smell!"

The bar was a pine one. Nance's reference to it as mahogany must be taken as poetical license.

Turning to her patrons, she continued no less emphatically:

"Now I don't want none o' yer shananigan, the minute my back's turned. When I leave a kid to run this machine, he's got to be treated white, jest as if my eye was on ye all the time. The galoot that tries to play roots on him because he's little, has got to bolt me—taller an' hide!"

"I'll be all right, Miss Nance. Jest you don't worry," ventured one of the men, reassuringly.

"Ef it hain't all right, somebody'll be carted out—that's all!" was Miss Nance's suggestive rejoinder.

Again addressing Rooty, she added her last injunction:

"Now there's that old whisky bloat over yander"—indicating Old Red Eye, who, hearing himself referred to, half rose, bobbed his head and mumbled: "Thankee, Nance! thankee, my girl!"—"ef he comes loafin' round hyer, jest lam' him over the head with the first thing yeou kin lay yer hands on—d'ye onderstand?"

"Yes'm," replied Rooty, with a nod.

"Now, ef that screech-owl has cooled off some, I'll go and see what she wants." And having duly installed her diminutive deputy, with powers administrative and punitive, Miss Nance departed with a march which showed that when she put her foot down, it was there.

"Now is our time!" muttered he who seemed to be chief of the prowlers out in the night. "Miss Nance has vamoosed, leavin' nobody but Dirty-face a-holt o' the ribbons. Is Forward!—and do the thing up brown!"

Throwing the door open with such violence that it slammed against the wall, he entered the saloon with a cocked pistol in his hand, followed closely by his satellites.

So unceremonious an entrance claimed immediate attention, and to more than one lip sprung the appellation:

"The Handsome Man!"

The little man near the bar, whom Spanish Dave had pronounced his "meat," turned suddenly pale, and wheeled round. He was looking straight into the barrel of a pistol along which ranged an eye in which murder was unmistakable.

"Natty Milliken," said his assailant, with fiendish, gloating exultation, "you've been sent fur. You're wanted down below!"

CHAPTER VI.

"STAMPED OUT."

THE purple flush of a man addicted to strong drink faded out of Natty Milliken's face, leaving in its place a sickly yellow pallor.

Instinctively his hand crept back toward the butt of the revolver slung to his belt.

"Hands to the front!" cried the Handsome Man, with the sharp, snarling accent of a coward who feared to yield one iota of the unfair advantage he held over his intended victim. "I've got the drop on you, and I handle weapons blasted keerless."

"What d'ye want out o' me?" demanded Natty Milliken, with the sullen doggedness of a man who felt that his doom was sealed.

"We've come to stamp you out!—and that's what's the matter with us!" was the portentous reply.

"And what fur have you come to stamp me out?" asked Natty, narrowly eying the Handsome Man and his heavy-browed back.

But unperceived by him, a man had slipped in through a window at his back, and was advancing upon him with the stealthy tread of a panther.

As this man, who rejoiced in the suggestive name of Featherfoot, advanced on tiptoe, his feline nature appeared in his glittering eyes fixed savagely on the object of his treacherous assault—in the crooking of his fingers, like claws—in the drawing back of his lips from his teeth.

To gain time for this human beast of prey, the Handsome Man remained silent.

"What fur have you come to stamp me out, I say?" repeated Natty, the words issuing from his lips like a succession of sounds without meaning.

His eyes began to contract. His muscles grew tense. He was gathering himself for a desperate fight for life.

The spectators—those having no part in the quarrel—held their breath.

The smile of a triumphant fiend distorted the face of Spanish Dave.

"What fur have we come to stamp you out?" he repeated; and, after a pause, "because you know too doggoned much, and your lip has come unbuttoned! That's what fur we've come to stamp you out!"

"Ye hain't got crowd enough fur to stamp one side o' me! I calls the hull gang!"

Natty Milliken yelled out his defiance.

At the same instant he made a lightning leap to one side, slapped his hand behind him, wrenched his pistol from its holster, cocked it in its passage to the front and leveled it straight at the heart of the Handsome Man.

The maneuver was a masterpiece. At the same time he placed himself out of line of his adversary's weapon, and brought his own to bear.

The tables would have been fairly turned; and the Handsome Man might have been paid in his own coin; but at this instant Featherfoot made his spring.

With a yell that made every heart bound he lit upon his prey.

Like steel bands his arms closed about the form of his victim, pinning his arms to his sides and jerking down his weapon, so that the bullet which otherwise would have sped straight to the heart of the Handsome Man bored its way harmlessly through the floor.

With a herculean effort Featherfoot raised his surprised victim and fairly hurled him over his head.

The unfortunate man turned a complete summersault and struck on his back.

With a snarl like that of a wild animal which smells blood, the Handsome Man bounded into the air and alighted with both feet on the breast of his prostrate victim.

Instantly all his companions closed in.

Then began the most sickening spectacle in all the round of brutality.

One man lay helpless, while half a dozen stamped upon him, in the face, breast and stomach—of all the phases of murder, the most shocking.

Amid the shocking imprecations of the assailants rose the pleading voice of the doomed wretch under their feet:

"There, gentlemen! For God's sake, have—ah! I'm a dead man! Oh!—ah!—Don't—Oh!—oh!"

His voice died away, and he lay motionless, save as a brutal kick tossed a limb this way or rolled his body that.

But his assailants were crazed with the frenzy of murder. How long they would have continued to mutilate him cannot be known, had there not now been an interruption.

At the beginning of the affray Rooty had rushed from behind the bar, yelling at the top of his voice:

"Nance! Nance! Nance!"

This appeal together with the noise of the contest attracted the Amazon, and she came rushing into the room in

battle array—that is to say, with teeth and nails in readiness.

"Hyer, you devils!" she screamed; and hurling herself upon the Handsome Man's "crowd," knocked, dragged and pushed until she had driven them all off save Spanish Dave himself.

In this perhaps the sound of her voice had more effect than her strength, though that was by no means contemptible. But the chief of the ruffians seized her by the wrist. The devil of his nature was fully aroused. He had tasted blood, and for the time was ruled by an insane impulse to slay everything that opposed him.

Stooping he drew the bowie-knife from his bootleg, and seemed about to plunge it into her side.

The woman saw her danger, and with a shriek of terror dashed the fingers of her unrestrained hand into the eyes of the murderer, and then sought to wrench herself free from his grasp.

And now a new champion appeared in her defense.

Old Red Eye, who had regarded the murderous assault on the luckless Natty with perfect impassibility, was animated into sudden life by Nance's peril.

Springing to his feet, he drew a revolver and leveled it at the center of the Handsome Man's broad back. By a strong effort of will, the hand which but a moment before had trembled with the palsy of the confirmed inebriate was now made steady.

"Hold on thar, my cove!" he cried. "None o' yer dog-goned foolishin' with Nance, ye know. I've got the drop on ye, an' ef ye don't want to stand as figger-head fur a fust-class funeral, you'd better pass out."

The Handsome Man cast his bloodshot eyes over his shoulder at his new foe with a malignant scowl.

Taking advantage of this diversion, Nance cast herself upon her assailant and tripped him with her foot.

In the effort to save himself from a fall, the ruffian relaxed his hold somewhat; and wrenching herself free, Nance darted away from him to the bar.

An instant later she returned to the contest with a cocked revolver in her hand.

Now her blue-gray eyes seemed to blaze, and her freckled face was yellow with rage. Her red hair seemed like the mane of a fury.

Now one could see why those rude men stood more in awe of her than one of their own sex. With her intense nature wrought to a white heat, she seemed scarcely human.

In a voice so husky that it was only a hoarse whisper, she said:

"Git! before I do you a deadly mischief!"

Pale with fear, the Handsome Man's "crowd" began to back toward the door.

They had scarcely gained the exit, when a figure, well calculated to attract attention, appeared at the door leading to the inner part of the house.

"The Hell-cat!" escaped from the lips of the Handsome Man, as he crossed the threshold backward.

CHAPTER VII.

THE HELL-CAT.

It was indeed Californy Sal.

Although her shoulders and arms were bare, the lady could scarcely be said to be in full evening dress, since her most conspicuous garment was a red-flannel petticoat. A second garment of like description was wrapped about her head, perhaps as a remedy for headache or neuralgia. Further, her stockings did not deserve the epithet *clocked*, the holes being at the heels and lacking artistic arrangement.

To say that Californy Sal was "mad," would be "drawing it mildly." The stiletto which she carried in her hand was less expressive than her passion-distorted face.

"Nance!—what's all this row about, the minute my back's turned?" she demanded. "Hyer I've got to git out o' my sick bed to shut up these wranglin' dogs—"

"The row's played. We don't want nothin' o' you," replied Nance, sullenly.

But here the Hell-cat's attention was fixed by Old Red Eye, who still stood near the middle of the room with his revolver in hand, his momentary firmness having again lapsed into the treacherous imbecility of the sot.

"This whisky-bloat has had a hand in, o' course!" cried the vixen, with a fierce oath. "Hyer, you beggarly whelp!—I reckon we've had enough o' you!"

And she sprung toward him with raised dagger.

Old Red Eye made no effort to defend himself.

Crying in abject supplication, he whined:

"Don't, Sal!—don't! I never done you no harm, Sal!"

But a spirit less broken and mean than his interfered.

Nance sprung forward and caught the wrist of the Hell-cat.

"Let up on Phil," she cried. "I reckon he ain't done no hurt."

"Do you dast to interfere with me, Nance Quigg?" yelled the termagant.

"I dast to interfere with the devil, or any of his kit!" was the defiant retort.

And Nance looked equal to her word.

Doubtless the Hell-cat knew her opponent. After glaring at her a moment, during which Nance never flinched, Californy Sal waived that issue.

"Wal, that lazy vagabones has got to git out o' hyer, anyhow," she said, returning to Old Red Eye. "Come! pull up stakes and vamoose the ranch! I've had enough o' you. You're no 'count but to spile whisky that ought to go to better men. Now, light out—and ef ever I see your ugly mug inside my door again, I'll pitch you into the gutter, neck and heels!"

"Sal," whined the inebriate, "air you goin' to turn me off? We've run in double harness a good many years, old girl. Air you goin' to chuck me into the street now?"

There was touching pathos in this appeal, despite the meanness of spirit in the man's air.

The woman, untouched, replied with scathing contempt:

"Bah! don't you talk about runnin' in double harness. I've been draggin' you by a lariat around my neck—that's what I've been a-doin', and more fool me! And now you've got to clear out!"

"Sal, I reckon I sot you up in this hyere business," ventured Old Red Eye.

But he was cut short by a terrific oath, as, goaded to fury by this gentle reminder, the Hell-cat sought to spring upon him and claw him with her nails.

Once more Nance restrained her.

"Come!" she said angrily to Old Red Eye, "you saved my life, and I reckon I saved yours; so I don't owe you nothin'. Now I hain't goin' to stand holdin' this devil all day; no more I hain't goin' to have the bother o' cleanin' up after she claws the daylights out o' you; so you jist git!"

"Air you turnin' ag'in' me, too, Nance?"

"Didn't ye hear me? I said *git*!"

"Ef you says *git*, I reckon *git* it is," said Old Red Eye, with resigned humility.

Then, while his bleared eyes grew even more watery and his voice trembled, he went on, addressing the Hell-cat:

"Sal, I reckon it's all right, ef so be you're tired o' me. But I never thought it would come to this. There—there—I won't bother ye no more. It's all right, Sal, old girl—it's all right."

He was walking backward toward the corner where he had recently been sitting; but tearing herself free from Nancy's restraining hand, the Hell-cat pounced upon him and dragged him toward the door.

"I'll jist git my wallet—it dropped out o' my pocket—ef it's all the same to you," he pleaded.

"Wallet be blowed," retorted the enraged woman, and thrust him through the door with such violence that he rolled in a pool of muddy water in the street.

Going to the corner, she picked from the floor a ragged old leather pocket-book, threw it after the owner, and slammed the door.

Old Red Eye gathered his disreputable person up, secured the pocket-book, and shambled off, still muttering deprecatingly:

"It's all right, Sal—it's all right, old girl!"

When the Hell-cat turned back into the saloon, Nance had already resumed her business air, and was saying:

"Look a hyere, men, pick up that carcass, and take it up to the back attic."

The awed crowd gathered about luckless Natty Milliken who was shockingly mutilated, lifted the limp body and bore it from the room.

"Hyere, Rooty!" was the next command. "Put ashes on them blood-spots, then mop the floor clean and sand it down again."

Rooty obeyed with alacrity, and the tragedy known as "stamping-out" was a thing of the past.

But a new excitement quickly succeeded it.

The door of the saloon was thrown violently open, and two men rushed in, wild with fear and gasping for breath, as if they had been running for their lives.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE DEATH RIDERS.

It will be remembered that Mrs. Kimball was received on top the Overland coach with great enthusiasm by Bryan o' Balleyhoolagan and Julius Caesar Apollonius Griggs and with chagrin by Cariboo Tom, the stage-driver, while inside the coach old Jasper Haveland had his growl cut short by a kiss from sweet-lipped Stella, and the Rev. Thomas à Becket Wharton sighed with relief, keeping an anxious eye, however, on the handbox left in his charge.

"Sure, mum," said Bryan as the stage drove off, "it's honored we air, mum, by the prisence av so foin a ladie as yersilf, mum. I spake fur mesilf and Sambo here, mum, that's a poor ignorant h'athin, mum, and, barring and saving yer prisence, is wan o' the devil's own, mum—"

"Fo' de Lo'd high golly!" interrupted Sam, rolling his eyes in wild amazement, "jist hyear dat sinnah murder de Lo'd's bressed trufe. Look a-hyere, Irish—don't you nebber hyear ob Ananias an' Sophi'? Call dis chile headen?—dis chile what's j'ined de Mefferdis' Church an' sung 'Role, Jordan, Role,' tell de ole meetin'-house jest like to burst? Call dis chile headen? 'Clar' to goodness! dat Mick's gettin' wusser an' wusser ebery day."

"Is it a Mick the like o' you would be afther calling me? And will I knock you aff the coach, I dunno!" cried the Celt in high dudgeon.

In his wrath he leaped to his feet and began to prance about the top of the coach and throw himself into grotesque pugilistic attitudes.

Sam's lips grew pale at the storm he had raised.

Mrs. Kimball screamed:

"Oh! fur massy sakes, don't let 'em fight. We'll all be killed!—we'll all be killed."

And in her fright she grasped Cariboo Tom by the arm for protection.

That worthy shook her rudely off, and with an oath cried to the excited Irishman:

"Hyar, you blasted fool! Squat! ur I'll knock you into the middle o' next week. Now cheese it—I mean business."

Instantly Pat's choler changed into fawning complaisance.

"Aw! av coorse, if yer honor says quit, sure sorra wan o' me would dispute ye. And I'll knock the face off o' that black devil av he creates a distoobrance on the coach. Av we must ride together, let us be peaceable, by all manes."

"How you frightened me, Patrick," said Mrs. Kimball, as he resumed his seat, shaking his fist slyly at Sam; "you looked so terrible in your anger."

"Axiing yer pardon, mum, Patrick is not my name, at all, at all. Shure, his honor, Mr. Haveland, calls me Pat fur short; but it's Bryan that the howly father (blessed be his mimory), called me in the choorch."

"Dat's so, fur sure," chimed in Sam. "Jes' de same way, dis chile's name is Julius Caesar Apollonius Griggs. Massa Haveland call him Sam—"

"Don't pay anny attintion to the like av him at all, mum. Sure, it's no manners he has, the impident spalpeen, to be a-interrupting av his betthers. And by the same token, was it terrible I looked? Faith, and that might well be. Where was it but in the parish av Balleyhoolagan that I was known far and wide as Bryan the Bowld—devil a less."

"Ah! I'm sure you're very brave," said Mrs. Kimball.

"B-ave is it?" cried Bryan the Bowld, straightening himself up and assuming a warlike air. "Faith, the crowns I've cracked at fairs and elections might tell a tale."

"I shall look to you for protection, if we are attacked by those terrible Death Riders we've heard so much about."

"And well ye may, mum. It's Bryan the Bowld that's prepared fur all the marauders in the mountains. *Whisht!* —d'ye moind!"

And with a great air of secrecy he opened a bundle which was tied in a checked cotton handkerchief, and drew therefrom a rusty horse-pistol, which Cariboo Tom viewed askant, and then regarded its owner in contempt too deep for words.

"Oh, don't p'int it this way!" cried the timid widow.

"Be 'asy, mum," said Bryan, reassuringly. "Devil a is in it at all, at all, at prisent. It's not loaded."

"Den what fur shall de burgularians be skeered, ef it hain't loaded?—hyah, hyah!"

Sam threw his head back, and nearly rolled off the coach in his mirth.

Bryan the Bowld viewed him with lofty disdain, and silently returned his weapon to his budget.

Not satisfied with this reception of his sally, Sam put in another thrust.

"Dat Irish is a monst'ous blow-hard," he said. "Ef dem Deff Riders comes, jest you see him cut dirt out o' dis hyar."

"Will I whelt the black face of yez, I dunno!" cried Bryan, goaded to fury, and drew back his fist as if about to put his threat into execution.

By this time the coach had reached a deep ravine, the first of the many gulches by which the face of the country now began to be scored.

A mass of clouds had temporarily obscured the moon.

From out the gloom a stern voice nipped the incipient quarrel in the bud.

"HALT!"

The cloud swept clear of the moon, revealing a masked horseman directly in the road, and several more on either side of the coach.

A second cloud almost instantly plunged the portentous scene again in darkness.

Mrs. Kimball screamed, and seized upon Bryan the Bowld, who tore himself from her grasp, crying:

"Howly Mother, protect us. We're lost intirely!"

And taking advantage of the gloom, he slipped from the top of the coach and incontinently fled into the bushes that bordered the road.

"Fo' de Lo'd high golly; de debbil's got dis sinnah, sure!" was the aspiration of the redoubtable Julius Caesar Apollonius Griggs, and following the example of his gallant compeer, he, too, made good his escape.

Cariboo Tom reined in his plunging horses, expressing his compliance with the demands of the robber, in the words already recounted, and then the coach and its occupants were at the mercy of the Death Riders.

Promptly old Jasper Haveland reached for the cudgel with which he had so summarily requited the insult of the Handsome Man; but it was nowhere to be found.

He was utterly defenseless.

"Wal, old gent, I reckon you're our meat," said he who seemed to be chief of the Death Riders, thrusting his pistol into the coach window. "Ef so be ye don't want to git the top o' yer head blowed off, you'll mosey out o' this hyer hearse right smart and peaceable, so's we kin s'arch fur the spondulicks, without no interference. Come, *all chasses!*"

"Don't attempt to resist them, Guardie," pleaded Stella, throwing her arms about the sturdy old hero. "For my sake don't anger them needlessly."

He looked at her, realized the terrible danger that threatened her, and checking the choler that nearly choked him, put his arm about her and descended from the coach without a word.

He had scarcely touched the ground when he detected one of the road-agents in the attempt to knock him down with the butt of his pistol.

He succeeded in warding off the blow, but was immediately seized on either side.

Like a flash he struck straight from the shoulder; and one of the ruffians went to grass like a log.

But he was overpowered by numbers and borne to the ground, where he struggled like a Titan, but all ineffectually.

Stella cried for Pat and Sam, and even appealed to the Rev. Thomas à Becket Wharton. But her servants were already beyond the reach of her voice, and the man of peace sat shivering with dread, glancing wistfully under the seat, and even at the precious handbox, as if calculating the feasibility of converting it into a place of concealment.

After a struggle as brief as it was fierce, hard-headed old Jasper Haveland was securely bound.

"Tie him on the back o' that hoss; I reckon he hain't heerd the last of us," was the rough command.

The chief of the outlaws was obeyed.

"Hallo! what have we hyere? A parson by all that's lovely! Step down and out, my chicken. I allow you was made right to our hand."

The Rev. Thomas à Becket Wharton rose to obey; but the care of the handbox was so impressed upon his mind that now, in his confusion, he mechanically took precautions for its safety by placing it carefully on the back seat.

"What in blazes air you hidin'?" demanded the outlaw. And laying a vigorous hand on the ecclesiastical raiment he jerked both divine and bandbox half out of the coach.

"Lay not the hand of violence on a servant of the Lord—" protested the Rev. Thomas.

But the outlaw cut him short.

"I reckon he's a stranger in these parts, boss. Hallo, pard! What have we got hyere? Woman fixin's, I'll be blowed!"

"You sassy vagabones! pass that bandbox up here this minute. If you muss that bonnet, I won't leave a hair in your head."

Mrs. Kimball stamped her foot in vixenish rage.

The outlaw looked up at her and burst into a guffaw.

"Come down out o' that, old gal," he commanded. "I always wanted a mother-in-law, and I reckon you're a model. Snake her down from there, pard."

He kept laughing to himself while Mrs. Kimball was assisted to the ground.

"Kin you ride, ma'am?" he asked, with mock politeness. "Hyere's a hoss fur ye."

"I'll break my neck—I know I will," sobbed the old lady, who had become very submissive the moment she felt the touch of an outlaw's hand.

The Rev. Thomas was already mounted.

"Now, young lady, hyere's a horse for you," said the robber chief; and, to Stella's surprise, a horse bearing a side-saddle was led forward.

Cariboo Tom stared in dumb amazement. He had had his coach plundered, but he had never before had his passengers carried off bodily.

"Come, my astonished friend," said the outlaw, sarcastically. "I reckon we're done with you. The word's *all promenades!* And if you stop before you git into Idaho, I reckon a change of air will be healthy for you."

"Boss," replied the stage-driver, "say no more. I'm as anxious to git red o' you as you air to git red o' me. Yours truly—no cards, no cake."

With an artistic flourish of his whip he touched the high leader on the flank, and the coach rolled away round a bend.

The outlaws stood motionless as long as it was in sight. Then came the command:

"And now fur head-quarters."

The horses were put in motion.

But there came an interruption.

"WHEN WANTED, I AM ALWAYS ON HAND."

Every one turned sharply.

There stood the Sportive Sport with his left palm flanking his deadly pistol-barrel, and displaying the word *always* in letters of phosphorescent light. Horse and rider were as motionless as a statue of bronze.

There was a flash, a sharp report, and the outlaw who had thus far held command fell off his horse to the ground.

"Away!" cried a sharp, high-pitched voice, and the Death Riders spurred their horses and those of their prisoners forward.

There was a fluttering of loose garments, and Mrs. Kimball's horse dashed to the side of that ridden by Stella.

The old lady grasped the girl's bridle-rein, and the two horses flew away down a fork of the ravine.

With a terrible cry of concentrated rage, the Sportive Sport dug his spurs into his horse's flanks and dashed in pursuit.

CHAPTER IX.

A WILD CHASE.

A TERRIBLE change had come over the careless, half-smiling face of the Sportive Sport.

When he uttered his characteristic challenge, a casual observer might have thought that he was jesting with friends. One more critical might have detected the burning intensity with which his eye rested for an instant on the figure of each of the outlaws in turn, which made his careless smile look like a mask.

At the instant when he fired at the ruffian who had Stella in charge, the expression of his face was such as it might have been had he been shooting a dog that had offended him.

But when Mrs. Kimball urged her horse to Stella's

side and grasped the girl's bridle-rein, then the Sportive Sport suddenly developed the ferocious eagerness of a madman or a wild beast.

His face became livid, his teeth clenched with a grating sound, his eyes blazed and seemed ready to leap from their sockets.

With a terrible cry of rage and hate and savage exultation, as if the emotions of a lifetime had culminated in that one instant of time, the Sportive Sport dug his spurs into his horse's flanks until the animal echoed his cry with a shrill neigh of pain, and leaped in pursuit of the fugitives.

Stella's first emotion, after the horror of seeing a man shot from his saddle at her very side, was a sense of protection in the vicinity of one of her own sex. What was her dismay at seeing the supposed Mrs. Kimball, with an agility which would have done credit to an acrobat, leap upward from the saddle, and in spite of the impediment offered by the fluttering female garments, alight astride, the act disclosing the fact that it was a man in disguise.

With a sweep of his hand he tore away the veil and spectacles, the bonnet still masking his head and face from the inspection of any one at a little distance.

But as he bent toward her grasping her bridle-rein, Stella was so near that in the fitful moonlight she caught sight of a face as pale as death and drawn into lines of unmistakable fear. Blended with this was a look of desperate resolve.

With the point of his bowie-knife Stella's captor goaded her horse into pace with his; and so the wild chase began.

Spurred into a breakneck gallop, the horses were coursing madly down a narrow bridle-path, the trees on either side placing the riders in imminent danger of having their brains dashed out, or being swept bodily from the backs of their horses.

Raising his pistol to the line of the eye, the Sportive Sport fired.

The animal bestriden by the false Mrs. Kimball uttered a neigh of pain and leaped forward with a spasmodic start.

The Sportive Sport had fired at the horse, not at the rider.

Stella's captor turned in his saddle and fired a return shot straight at the breast of his pursuer.

The awkward position and the motion of his horse disconcerted his aim, and the Sportive Sport rode on unscathed.

Once more the pursuer raised his deadly weapon.

Then in a sharp, rasping voice came back the terrible threat:

"Dare to fire, and I will blow out her brains."

At sight of this man's face Stella Raymond had received a shock, the nature of which she was unable to analyze.

Now, as his voice, undisguised, fell upon her ear, her heart again leaped into her throat, she knew not why.

In pursuance of his threat he directed his weapon at her head.

The effect on the Sportive Sport was instantaneous. He fairly gasped with dread; and with that spasmodic shrinking by which we are seized in sympathy with one in great peril, he drew back his pistol and involuntarily reined in his horse.

The fugitive saw his advantage, and laughed back a wild laugh of derision.

For one instant the horse of the Sportive Sport settled back on his haunches. The next he felt the spur again, and shot forward like a thunderbolt.

Now his master gave him the rein and urged him forward with voice and spur; and the noble animal responded with exertions that seemed about to snap his thews of steel.

The Sportive Sport now gave every energy to overtaking his enemy.

Once more the pursued took deliberate aim and fired.

The Sportive Sport felt a stinging sensation on his left cheek.

He put his fingers to his face. When he removed them they bore a crimson stain.

On! on! sped the chase.

Again the disguised outlaw fired.

The following horse tossed his head sharply to one side, and shied from his course.

The next instant the bridle slipped from his head, having

been cut by the bullet, and dangled under his feet, threatening to trip him up.

With a quick, upward jerk the Sportive Sport evaded this danger, quickly knotted his bridle-rein and lipped it over the pommel of his saddle.

Now his horse knew no control save the spur that goaded him incessantly.

On! still on! sped the wild chase.

"Hal hal hal ha!" came back the tantalizing laugh.

The Sportive Sport rode with set teeth and compressed lips, as silent and grim as Destiny.

He was gaining on the fugitive.

A flash!—a sharp report!—and the fugitive had fired again.

This time the ball took no effect. But might not the next bullet seek out the secret springs of life?

The very fact that the pursuer was gaining upon his enemy increased his danger by shortening the distance.

It was terrible to ride thus straight upon death.

Once more the outlaw raised his weapon.

The Sportive Sport prepared to give him shot for shot.

With a derisive laugh, the captor turned his weapon upon his captive.

The Sportive Sport was disarmed.

But Stella now took a share in the struggle.

Up to this time she had done nothing but cling to her saddle in voiceless terror.

Now, when she saw her life threatened, she gathered courage of desperation, grasped the hand that held the deadly weapon to her head, and thrust it from her.

The pistol exploded harmlessly in the air.

The next instant the girl grasped the rein that hung on her horse's neck, and tugged at it with all her might.

The animal chanced to have on a Mexican bridle with a cruel curb bit. Her captor holding the other rein, the curb-rein lay ready to Stella's hand; and with this instrument of torture even her woman's strength was sufficient to bring the horse back on his haunches, and check him in his mad career.

Like a flash the rein was wrenched from the abductor's hand, and he rode on alone.

Albeit a good horsewoman, Stella was not prepared for so sudden a stop.

She knew that she could not retain her seat, and made an effort to disengage herself from the saddle and leap sideways.

Then there was a swift rush through space—a concussion—oblivion!

Seeing Stella disengaged from her captor, the Sportive Sport uttered a yell of triumph, raised in his stirrups and instantly fired, not at the body of his enemy, but at that of his horse.

Stella's horse recovered himself the moment he was relieved from the strain on the cruel bit, and, frightened by the yell of the pursuer, again dashed forward down the trail.

Though he saw Stella fall, and did not know but that she had been instantly killed, the Sportive Sport did not check his horse, but rather goaded him now the more fiercely, yelling forth a wild and terrible laugh as he fired his pistol again and again in quick succession.

Now his burning eye held but one object—the flying figure with its fluttering woman's garb.

As Stella's horse attempted to pass him, the outlaw again seized his bridle-rein.

It was well that he did so, for at this instant his own horse received another shot, uttered a cry of pain and stumbled, almost falling to the ground.

With a spring, the outlaw gained the back of the uninjured animal, his own falling back between him and his pursuer.

With this change the terrible chase kept on.

The trail being narrow, the Sportive Sport was impeded by the wounded animal, and he had the chagrin of seeing his foe about to escape him.

He was equal to the emergency.

The abandoned horse was directly in front of him. Another shot brought him to the ground.

The Sportive Sport uttered a yell and dug his spurs into his horse's sides.

The animal vaulted high, cleared the obstruction, and sped on.

Now the struggle was man to man, with the advantage

on the side of the pursuer, since he was better mounted and could fire straight to the front without turning in his saddle.

A grim smile came to the lips of the Sportive Sport. He looked like a Nemesis as he raised his pistol.

There in the trail before him, darting through alternate bars of light and shadow, was the man whom he had pursued for years with the pertinacity of a bloodhound, and who for years had eluded him like a phantom.

"At last! at last!" he muttered.

But at that instant there was a flash—a report—and, with a groan, his horse sunk under him.

The Sportive Sport stood gazing helplessly at his dead horse—the animal which had borne him so nobly in that terrible struggle for life and death, to give up the chase only with his last gasp. In the ears of the baffled man there rung persistently a mocking laugh; his mental vision was haunted by a figure clothed in fluttering garments just vanishing in the shadows.

With a deep drawn breath he turned slowly to walk back over the course he had come.

"I wonder if she is dead?" he said, in a strangely apathetic tone.

CHAPTER X.

THE SPORTIVE SPORT'S PLEDGE.

THE men who rushed into Californy Sal's saloon in such terror were none other than our friend Bryan the Bowld and the equally valiant Julius Caesar Apollonius Griggs.

Completely demoralized by the first appearance of danger, Pat gave no thought to the formidable weapon he had just been showing to the false Mrs. Kimball, nor to that display of valor which might be expected of him in consideration of his illustrious pedigree.

As for Sam, he had but one thought—not to lose sight of Pat. Not that he had any faith in the Irishman's courage or ability to protect him; but his imagination peopled the woods with terrors without name, and had he been given the choice between instant death in the company of some one whom he knew and being left alone in that solitude, he would have chosen the former.

So they ran without stop or stay all the way to Idaho and, Californy Sal's saloon being the first house, tumbled heels over head into it.

"Och! murther in Oirland! We're kilt intirely!" yelled the frightened Celt.

"Fo' de Lo'd de debil's broke loose in dis hyah benighted country!" cried Sam, his piety ever forming a prominent element of his terror.

"Bair the dure! bair the dure!"

And Pat put his broad back against the door, as if to keep out pursuers at his very heels.

"Let dis hyah chile hide somewhah! Dey's comin' wid guns, an' blunderbusses, an' cheese-knives! Fur shure, de debil's rammin' round like a ragin' lion. Whah kin dis chile hide?"

In her peremptory way Miss Nance seized the terrified negro by his top-knot, and shook him until his teeth rattled like castanets.

"Hallo, hyere! you blasted coward! Who air you, and what's the matter with you?" she demanded.

Sam dropped upon his marrowbones and clasped his hands.

"Don't let them debbils git at dis chile, missus," he cried. "I's Julius Caesar Apollonius Griggs. Fo' de Lo'd, I's a gone sannah, shore."

"Sure, we're kilt intirely by a score o' divils in masks," cried Pat to the occupants of the saloon, who gathered around him with a flood of questions.

"Dah's ole Massa Haveland—he's done gone bu'sted fur dis world o' sin an' tribilashin. An' Missy Stella, dat's jest been a angel on dis hyar earf, has gone straight up to de Hallelugeram in a chariot ob fire, shore."

And honest Sam shed tears of regret.

"Hyar! Don't speak both to onc't. What's the row, anyway?"

"Faith, it's Bryan o' Balleyhoolagan that'll tell ye no lie about it, at all."

"It's jest this hyer way—"

"Arrah, thin! Is it the likes o' you that'll take the words out o' me mouth?"

"Dat Irish nebber git nuffin straight, nohow."

"Don't attend him, at all, at all. Sure, he's a poor ignorant h'athin that the devil himself wouldn't own fur the manners of 'um."

"Dah was fifty men fire into dat coach—"

"Was it fifty? Faith, it was a small *army*!—a hundred, ivery mother's son av thim! Ye could rade a newspaper by the flashin' o' their weapons; and be me sowl the bullets came that thick ye couldn't see betune thim!"

"An' you jist ought to see Irish run. Hyah! hya-a-ah!"

"Divil swape the nagur. Is it run? Howld me coat, anny of yez."

"Go it, ye sardines," laughed one of the spectators.

"I'll back you, Cuffy," cried a second. "Reach fur his snoozer."

But a third interposed:

"Let's find out what's the row, first. Then they kin sail in and be happy."

But Bryan the Bowld had been wounded in the tenderest point.

The Celt tore off his coat and cast it on the floor, rolled up his sleeves with great parade, spat on his hands and threw himself into a pugilistic attitude.

All this while Sam showed a marked disposition to "crawl-fish."

"Dat's all right; dat's all right," he said to those who would have assisted him to remove his coat. "Bryan an' me's ole frien's. Ob co'rise, we's ole frien's—hain't we, Bryan?"

"Agral! Is it frien's? Divil a bit. No, ye ugly baste, it's inimies we air—mortal inimies. Stand before me like a man, till I knock the face off yez, fur yer impidence."

As Sam "took water," Bryan the Bowld's warlike proclivities became more pronounced, until now he looked very truculent indeed.

Sam's eyes began to roll with apprehension, and at this critical moment, when by the test of battle his compeer might have established a relentless tyranny over him, his guardian angel interposed in his behalf an object of greater interest in the sound of wheels and horses' hoofs.

Every one rushed to the door, to discover Cariboo Tom driving by on his "hearse," at a pace which sorely wounded his pride.

The off leader was limping wretchedly and the hearse was empty.

"Hallo, Cariboo! What in Cain's the row?"

"Bagged, body and breeches! Cl'aned out—scooped—gobbled up like a June-bug off a sweet pertater vine. The doggonedest go I ever see—I'll be blowed!"

"What's up? No pilgrims?"

"Sot out from Golden City with six—huffy old party, Jerusalem purty gal, parson, mother-in-law to the devil, and two—Hallo! thar's the skunks now, I'll be blowed!"

"What—these two?"

"Them's the varmint. Now I'll bet they was so skeered they'd outrun the best team in the country, if that thar off hoss hadn't come down kerflop an' stove hisself all to pieces, so that I've had to jist crawl all the way from the Black Holler. I tell ye what it is, gents, I'm down on my luck all round, this trip."

"But whar's the rest o' the pilgrims?"

"That's jist whar the doggoned thing's the crookedes'. The Death Riders dropped down on us and jist gobbled 'em all up—all but them two—and then give me the word o' command to dust. An' you bet yer bottom dollar I dusted!"

Followed by the crowd, the coach proceeded to its destination before the Metropolitan Hotel, and there Cariboo Tom gave his story now in detail.

The excitement spread rapidly until the space before the hotel was thronged by a crowd of citizens who discussed the matter with black brows.

Nothing could be done that night, but in the morning "the thing had got to be looked into. That sort o' thing was callin' doggone loud fur the Vigilantes."

Meanwhile, walking slowly and with clouded brow, the Sportive Sport had regained the spot where Stella Raymond had been thrown from her horse.

While he was looking for her, expecting to find her in a swoon, if not killed outright, she startled him by stepping forth into the bridle-path.

The girl was very pale and panting with fear.

"Oh! I was so frightened!" she exclaimed. "I did not whether it was you returning, or an enemy."

"And I am greatly surprised and delighted," he rejoined. "Are you not hurt?"

"Beyond a few scratches and bruises, I have come off without injury. I have been more frightened than hurt, I think. But your horse? You did not overtake—him?"

The girl shuddered slightly.

A cloud flitted across the face of the Sportive Sport, and was instantly gone.

"No," he said, in his usual tones. "He succeeded in shooting my horse from under me. It is rather unfortunate, since it leaves me without means of conveying you to Idaho, which is full five miles distant."

The girl gazed at this man who could speak thus lightly of a reverse which must have been like the bitterness of death to him. The fierce pride that held the hardest strokes of fortune in such utter contempt repelled her with a sense of fear, while its great strength attracted her with a sort of fascination.

"Do not be concerned for me," she said. "I can easily walk the distance."

"If you are strong enough, let us lose no more time," he said, and without more ado led the way.

Regaining the stage-road, they found the scene of the late attack deserted.

The man whom the Sportive Sport had shot from his horse was not on the spot where he had fallen.

The girl stood trembling with anxiety while her companion looked about.

"It is not clear to me," he said, at last, "why the passengers should be carried off. Road-agents as a rule do not care to burden themselves with anything but money. Was anything said which might give you a clew?"

"No. Nothing."

"Your guardian is a rich man?"

"Yes."

"Ah! That may explain—"

"Oh! you do not think they will injure him? Why should they?"

"Everything depends on their motives," said the Sportive Sport, thoughtfully. "If they wish to— But there's the parson. Was he one of your party?"

"No."

"Do you know anything about him?"

"He was a perfect stranger."

"Humph! I can form no theory which will consistently include your guardian and the minister," said the Sportive Sport, absently; and suddenly looking full at her he asked:

"Did you see that man's face?"

He did not designate more definitely whom he meant; but she understood him.

"Yes," she replied.

"Can you describe it?"

"I think so. It was the face of a man of perhaps twenty-five or thirty, clean shaven, and with a scar on the left cheek."

"A scar! Describe it carefully."

There was an air of suppressed eagerness beneath the enforced calm which did not escape the girl's notice. The Sportive Sport was evidently seeking some clew by which he could know his man at any future meeting.

"It was like the cut of a knife running from the cheekbone to the base of the jaw."

"Ah! he cannot well disguise that!" exclaimed the Sportive Sport, and a sudden gleam of exultant hate shot into his eye.

Seeing the apprehensive questioning in the girl's face, he turned away and said:

"Come, let us go on. We can accomplish nothing by delaying here."

In silence the girl walked beside him until her distress would no longer be denied expression.

"Mr. Gary," she asked, "cannot something be done to rescue my guardian from those terrible men? You can get together a party of men and save him, can you not?"

The Sportive Sport stopped and looked her squarely in the face. He saw in quivering lip and tearful eye how deeply she loved the old man who was crusty and crabbed to every one save her.

A wistful expression came into his eyes, as he gazed at her so steadily that she blushed high and let her eyes fall before his. Then he turned away and walked on, having apparently forgotten to answer her question.

Now as he walked forward with his eyes bent on the ground, the hard lines faded out of his face, and a wonderful tenderness succeeded.

Though greatly embarrassed by his manner, the girl persisted in her question.

"You can save him—can you not?"

Again the Sportive Sport stopped, and in a deliberate, tense voice, which bespoke indomitable purpose, said:

"I promise you to do all that man can do. Whatever is the motive for this devilment, the man who so narrowly escaped me to-night is the prime-mover, and I think I can read something of his purpose. He has eluded me for the time; but I shall yet live to hunt him to the death!"

The girl saw some great wrong struggling up through the man's deep tones, and by its stern menace was again hushed into awed silence.

They had entered the town and were approaching the Metropolitan Hotel, when they passed two men who were lurking in the shadow of a shanty.

"In the fiend's name!" muttered one, grasping the arm of the other, "there's that devil again, and he's got the gal in tow."

On the visage of the speaker was a scowl too fiendish for any other face than that of the Handsome Man. There were not two such in the mountains.

"It is the Sportive!" replied the other with an oath. "I'll bet you my share of the next divide that we've got to have a new captain. The Nameless would never give up such a dainty morsel while he could kick."

"Curse him! he come near putting me out of the way of promotion," muttered the Handsome Man, raising his hand to his breast just over the heart.

"Why not tap his hide fur him now?" prompted the second speaker.

With a murderous scowl on his hideous face, the Handsome Man drew his bowie-knife, and began to creep forward.

CHAPTER XI.

PLOTTING IN THE DARK.

THE Handsome Man and "his crowd" might "stamp out" Natty Milliken with impunity, since he was almost without friends in Idaho, but to have treacherously killed a man so popular as the Sportive Sport, "without giving him any show," would have "called powerful loud" for Judge Lynch. Besides, in a contest, man to man, even taken at so great a disadvantage, our hero might not be easily disposed of.

These considerations unnerved the arm of the Handsome Man; and returning his half-drawn knife to his boot-leg, he turned away, muttering:

"Not yet—not here. His time'll come. But I don't fancy any neck-stretchin' whar I'm in the minority. Feather Foot, git the boys together. This thing's got to be looked into."

"Hadn't we better go to head-quarters and see what's become o' the captain?"

"No. If he's passed out we'll hear all about it at the Metropolitan. I'll go myself, and you git the boys."

The two separated, the Handsome Man following the Sportive Sport and Stella to the hotel.

The girl had immediately retired to her room.

The Sportive was surrounded by an excited crowd, who hung upon every word that fell from his lips.

He seemed wholly unreserved, speaking in his usual off-hand, unimpassioned way. And yet he gave them only the bald facts of the attack.

No one suspected that he had any personal interest in the man from whom he had rescued Stella.

It was arranged that on the morrow a party should go in quest of the Death Riders, and seek to rescue the captive they had so strangely taken.

By acclamation the Sportive Sport was asked to lead the Vigilantes.

"Gentlemen," he said, "I will lead you on one condition."

"State it."

The Sportive hesitated a moment.

"You will think it a strange one, he said at last; 'but in this country I reckon every man learns to mind his own business in things he don't understand.'"

"Blaze away, pard, I reckon thar won't nobody ask fur a sight o' your hand."

"Well, then, I will lead you on this condition—if we tree these Death Riders, and there is any one of them under five-foot-four, no one shall shoot at him to kill under any circumstances. If you want to wing him, all right. For the rest, I say—play your own game; but that one man is my meat. Do you agree?"

The crowd assented, though wondering much.

"Gents," said the Handsome Man, "I don't like too much chin-music an' palaver, an' fur one, I don't take no prisoners, you bet! Who's in favor o' exterminatin' these devils from the word go?"

The crowd set up a yell of assent.

The Sportive Sport turned and regarded the speaker with a cold, steady stare.

The Handsome Man pretended not to notice this. By thrusting himself into prominence he showed that he had no fears of any one taking up Natty Milliken's quarrel.

In a few minutes he withdrew from the crowd and sauntered carelessly down the street.

On the outskirts of the town he heard a low whistle, and jumping a low rail fence he soon gained the further side of a tumble-down shanty, which had long since been abandoned.

A man short in stature and light of build stepped from the shadows and extended his hand.

The Handsome Man grasped it eagerly, with an oath expressive of pleasure and surprise.

"Captain, I swear, I was afraid you was done for when I saw that galoot waltzin' of the gal up to the Metropolitan. How in Cain did he manage to cut you out?"

"That's a long story, which will keep," said the captain, a little impatiently. "Meanwhile, did the others meet with better success?"

"Everything is lovely and the goose hangs high!"

"Good enough. And where's your set?"

"I expected to find them here."

"They'll be here soon, then."

"Yes. Featherfoot is whipping 'em in."

"How many have you got?"

"Ten, countin' you and me."

"The girl stops at the Metropolitan to-night?"

"Yes."

"In what room?"

"The room lookin' out on the lean-to."

"Dave, she's got to come out o' there!"

"All right, cap'n."

"To-night."

"Ef you say so, out she comes."

"You have horses?"

"We're never without 'em, you bet! Some o' these fine mornin's it'll be as much as our necks air worth to be without horses!"

"What men can be depended on?"

"It's a deuced ticklish job."

"And if we have any bungling somebody 'll have to pay for it!"

The captain scowled in a way that was not at all engaging.

"You're the devil and all, my bantam!" thought the Handsome Man. "Some o' these days, when you git on your high hoss, you'll git throwed!"

But aloud he only said:

"Do you want to take a hand in?"

"Yes. I don't let out such a job."

"Wal, how's Featherfoot fur one?"

"We want him, of course."

"Hum!—'we.' Does that mean me and you?"

"Yes."

"Wal, that's three, so fur. Then thar's Seaford, an' Lane, an' One-Eye, an'—"

"Hold on!—that's enough. The rest can go to the hotel bar and kick up a row, under cover of which we can act."

"Hallo! hyer's the gang."

A signal whistle was heard.

A moment later several dark forms crept through the shadows.

For the most part they were men of intelligence far inferior to that of the man whom they addressed as captain. Their most general characteristic was brutal ferocity.

They seemed glad to be assured of the safety of their chief.

He seemed to look upon them as so many intelligent machines which he held subservient to his purposes.

While he was busy instructing them in the parts they were to play, they were all startled by a smothered sneeze which had certainly proceeded from no one of their number.

"Lie low!" was the quick command of the captain, and instantly every man slipped from sight in the shadows.

"What was that?" asked the captain of the Handsome Man, after a long pause.

"A sneeze."

"Where from?"

"Inside the shanty, I reckon."

"Come! listeners are expensive luxuries for us."

"You bet!"

"Men, don't let anything leave this place alive!" said the captain.

Several low whistles were heard from different points, showing that the men, mindful of their duty, had surrounded the shanty, and were on the watch.

"Halloa, within the shanty!" called the captain, in guarded tones.

He listened.

The stillness was as deep as death.

"Look here, whoever you are," he called again, "you might as well show up at once. We don't stand any foolishness."

Again the silence was unbroken.

"The third and last call! Are you coming out, or shall we drag you?"

Still no response.

"Could we have been fooled?" asked the captain, in some chagrin.

"No. It was something, sure," asserted the Handsome Man.

"Let us unearth it, then."

"All right. Here goes."

"Have you your pistols ready?"

"Yes."

"Hold on. I usually take the lead, if you please. Now, follow me."

The captain spoke in quiet, haughty tones, and stepped before the Handsome Man, who in his eagerness, was about to precede him.

With a scowl which the darkness hid the latter took the second place.

He was evidently bitterly jealous of the supremacy of the man so much inferior to himself in stature.

"Be in readiness," said the captain. "I am about to strike a match."

CHAPTER XII.

OLD RED EYE RUNS INTO HOT WATER.

THE captain was certainly no coward. He was coolly exposing himself to the danger of instant death, if there was really an enemy lurking there.

The phosphorus ignited and the sulphur burned blue.

He screened the match between his palms until it burned brighter, illuminating his face.

Before he could throw the light about the room a puff of wind extinguished it, leaving all again in darkness.

With an oath he struck another match, his impatience breaking it in two.

A third attempt was more successful. He held the blazing splint of wood above his head and glanced quickly around.

In a corner lay a bundle of rags.

With a stride the captain reached it and gave it a kick.

"Get up here, you infernal sneak!" he said, contemptuously.

There was a sound something between a grunt and a groan; the bundle of rags moved, and discovered the disreputable person of Old Red Eye.

"Eh! What d'ye want? Leave me alone," he said, with simulated drowsiness, rubbing his eyes as if just aroused from sleep.

"You can't play 'possum on us. What are you eavesdropping for?"

"Who in the devil are you? Go 'way, an' leave me alone!"

And Old Red Eye curled himself up again, as if for another snooze.

The heavy hand of the Handsome Man fell upon his shoulder, and by an effort of his great strength he raised the old toper to his feet in a way that was by no means gentle.

"Hadn't you better blow out the match?" he suggested. "I reckon we don't need no light to finish him off by."

The captain instantly complied, and they were again in darkness.

"Shall I slit his gullet for him?" asked the Handsome Man. "If we spile it fur pourin' whisky down, it won't spit no secrets up."

Now Old Red Eye began to quiver in every nerve of his shattered frame.

"Hold on, gents," he said, in a quavering voice. "I reckon I hain't done you no harm."

"He knows enough to put all our necks in the halter," said the Handsome Man.

"No, gentlemen. I don't know nothin'. I'm only a pore ole man what's been kicked out o' house and home. I won't trouble nobody long in this world. I throwed up the sponge when Californy Sal chucked me into the street. An' now all I want is a q'iet place where I kin die in peace."

Old Red Eye spoke in a tone of broken-hearted despondency. At least there was no dissimulation in the wrongs inflicted by Californy Sal's ingratitude.

"So much the more reason why we should give the old bloak a through ticket," said the Handsome Man, adding with a hoarse laugh: "It's an act of mercy! Ha! ha! ha!"

The match having been extinguished, the other outlaws had gathered around. They now joined in the ghastly hilarity. There was grim humor in the suggestion that they could do an act of mercy.

"Hold on," said the captain. "We may have use for this man. Come! no dodging, now. If you ain't square-toed, you'll catch blue blazes. Own up that you have heard every word that has passed during the last ten minutes."

"I come in hyar—"

"No tripping, mind!"

And the captain placed the cold muzzle of his pistol against Old Red Eye's temple.

"I wasn't listenin'. I couldn't help hearin' some things that you said," stammered the old bummer.

"In other words you heard every syllable?"

"Well, yes."

"It is needless then for us to tell you that we are a part of the famous Death Riders?"

"I didn't know that."

"That is to say, you do know it."

"You didn't say so before."

"Nevertheless, you know it."

"I may have thought that—ah—that is, I may have—"

"In short, you have thought, and you still do think nothing else."

"Well, if you put it that way—"

"And that is the only sensible way to put it?"

"I suppose so—yes."

"You also know that the coach was attacked to-night by the Death Riders—that is to say, by us?"

"I've heard some talk about it."

"That all the passengers were made prisoners, except two servants?"

"Yes."

"That the Sportive afterwards rescued a girl from one of the outlaws disguised in woman's clothes; and from our conversation here you have gathered that that person was none other than the captain of the band—myself?"

"Ye-es."

"And that it is now my purpose to recapture the girl from the hotel—and the manner in which this is to be accomplished?"

"I couldn't help hearin' it. I didn't mean to."

"At all events, you did hear it?"

"Yas."

"Well, having all this knowledge, don't you consider yourself a rather dangerous person—dangerous for us?"

"Not if I keep my mouth shut," said Old Red Eye, shrewdly.

"What guarantee have we that you will keep it shut if we don't deprive you of the power of opening it?"

"What fur should I blab?" said Old Red Eye, gloomily.

"Ef you gents wants to stop the coach, I reckon it hain't no funeral o' mine. What fur should I bother my head about other folks? I allow I don't owe the world nothin' but kicks. Even Sal's set me out, bag an' baggage; an' Nance give me the go-by."

The keen bitterness of his tone was unmistakable, and a

break in the shattered roof of the shanty felt atwart his face, showing a man who from hating the world might easily be turned to injuring it.

The captain eyed him a moment, and then said abruptly:

"I understand that you jumped the States to escape the consequences of your excellent penmanship."

"I!" exclaimed Old Red Eye, looking up in genuine surprise. "No, boss. That hain't so. Whoever told you that lied. I never done nothin'—"

"More reprehensible than running away with another man's wife!"

Old Red Eye dropped his head.

"It was a hard old run fur me," he said, dejectedly.

The captain laughed.

"Well, I don't know as it would do for the pot to call the kettle black," he said. "I've done as bad as that myself. But to return, you were a book-keeper and an excellent penman?"

"Boss, I reckon I could say that and tell no lie."

"Can you write now?"

The old toper held up his shaky hand.

"It's twenty-five years back," he said, with a sad smile.

"You're blasted nigh a total wreck, I grant," said the captain. "But perhaps we can patch you up, and practice will restore some of your old skill. Now, you understand that you are entirely in my power?"

"Yes."

"By a word I could send you up the flume for good?"

"Yes."

"Dave, give him a nip out of that flask."

Old Red Eye started as a poor cast-away at sea might rouse himself at the sight of—

"LAND HO!"

His eyes sought the flask with a wolfish craving. His hands clutched it as a drowning man might clutch a rope thrown to his rescue.

He trembled from head to foot as he raised it to his lips. All the while he was drinking he clung to the bottle and his eyes rolled from side to side as if he feared that some one would snatch it from him before he had drained it.

"I've got him!" was the captain's mental comment.

"How do you like that?" he asked aloud.

"It is the one solace which can ease my passage down to perdition."

This outburst proved that Old Red Eye was not so ignorant a man as his general speech would imply.

"Ah!" exclaimed the captain, quickly. "Then you have made up your mind that that is your ultimate destination?"

"Yes."

"Then a little immorality more or less on the way will make no difference?"

"No."

"You begin to understand that I am about to give you a chance for your life?"

"I do."

"On condition that you will serve me, and will not betray me nor my men."

"In addition to life, you will give me all the whisky I want?"

"That's the whole thing in a nutshell. Do you agree?"

"Yes."

"You are willing to become one of us? You will take our oath?"

"Give me whisky, and you may have my soul and body!"

"The devil is welcome to the former. All I want is the use of your hand and brain."

"They are yours."

"Men, strip him, to administer the oath."

Old Red Eye was stripped to the waist.

Then the outlaws gathered around him in a circle, drew their bowie-knives, touched their points to his naked skin all round his body, and stood in profound silence.

Now the moon became again obscured, and the terrible circle of the Death Riders faded gradually from view. Only the slight pricking of the points of their bowie-knives showed that they still stood awaiting the ordeal which bound another soul to their dark fraternity.

Then out of the dense blackness came a stern, relentless voice administering an oath whose terrible invocations and cruel penalties had been devised to strike terror to the souls of the ignorant, superstitious men.

At its close each of the circle pressed his bowie-knife forward sufficiently to make a slight puncture in the skin of the neophyte.

Then all swore allegiance anew, and bound themselves to impose instant death upon any one guilty of treachery, no matter when or where the act were committed.

"And now for the Metropolitan!" exclaimed the captain, when this ceremony was completed.

They had scarcely reached the road when the captain uttered a low hissing sound.

Instantly the men slunk out of sight on either side of the road.

With a slow yet firm step a man was approaching. His eyes were on the ground. He was evidently absorbed in deep meditation.

"The Sportive, by all the furies!" muttered the captain to the Handsome Man, who was at his elbow.

Without replying in words, the Handsome Man reached forth his hand and pulled at a finely braided cord which was wound several times about the waist of his chief.

As if in compliance with the mute suggestion the captain carefully unwound the cord.

It was very slender and strong, having leaden weights at either end.

The victim of this diabolical treachery walked straight into the ambush, passing so near that the spreaders of the snare might almost have touched him.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE SPORTIVE SPORT INSNARED.

INSTEAD of retiring to rest to recruit his strength for the tax which the next day must lay upon it, the Sportive Sport withdrew from the crowd that thronged the Metropolitan bar, and passed out into the night.

As soon as he was free from the gaze of men his face underwent a sudden and decided change, his wonted careless smile giving place to tokens of a grand upheaval in a strong nature.

"I have known her twelve hours—a little half-day!" he muttered, "and I am her slave! To my infatuated perceptions she is all that is beautiful—everything that is pure. Besotted fool that I am!—she has smiled at me; I have held her hand; we have exchanged a dozen words! And was that other less beautiful—to the eye? Was she not as pure—in seeming? Oh! curses on this heart that only betrays us to suffering! Why cannot we pluck it out, and leave only brains to hate and plan vengeance?"

He walked with clenched hands, beads of sweat standing on his forehead.

Presently he covered his face with his hands and stood perfectly still.

He was calling up before his mental vision every slightest lineament of the face of that girl who, all in a moment, as it were, had twined in and out his heart those tendrils of love which, like a mantling vine, may beautify all, or, like some clinging parasite, may poison and destroy.

As it had appeared illumined by that breaking smile of gratitude when first she gave him her hand, so now his strong, longing passion recreated it; and quivering in an ecstasy of love, he murmured:

"Stella! Stella!"

There was melting tenderness in the tone with which he dwelt on the name; and with clasped hands he continued:

"Oh! if it could be!—if it *could* be!"

Wrapped in these emotions he walked oblivious to his surroundings, and so fell an easy prey to the captain of the Death Riders.

No sooner had he passed than his foe rose in his very tracks, as silently as a shadow.

Giving forth no warning sound, the cord with its weights was whirled round and round and hurled on its cowardly errand.

The weights spread out. The cord struck him across the small of the back. Round and round his body like lightning whirled the weights, pinioning his arms in the fine, strong coils of the treacherous cord.

The Sportive Sport was a helpless prisoner in the hands of his deadliest foe!

It was a terrible awakening from that dream of love to stand face to face with a dog's death.

All in a breath he was surrounded, disarmed and securely bound. His captors were all masked, so that he could not recognize them.

The captain spoke.

"I suppose you know me; and it is needless for me to say that any outcry will result in your instant death?"

"I do know you, and believe you equal to anything," said the Sportive Sport, quietly.

"Fetch him out of the road," ordered the captain; and the prisoner was conveyed to the shanty which had just witnessed Old Red Eye's initiation.

The captain had him placed where the fitful moonlight might reveal his face, when it was not intercepted by the black clouds which ever and anon shrouded the earth in a pall of darkness. He then took up his station immediately in front of his prisoner, and stood regarding him with an insolent smile of triumph.

The Sportive Sport was now enduring the bitterness of death, not on his own account, but because of the awful peril that menaced her who had become to him even dearer than life itself, if this villain now compassed his death; yet he was outwardly calm and unmoved.

"Well, my dear Gary," said the captain, lightly, "the last turn of the wheel of fortune seems to have transposed our relative positions somewhat. How do you relish being the under dog in the fight?"

"Seth Randall," was the steady reply, "so far as your metaphor relates to yourself it is an excellent one; but whether the upper or under dog now, you are sure to come in the end to the dog's death you so richly deserve."

"Not, however, until I have had some solid chunks of comfort at your expense, I fancy. I believe I owe you something for the past; but I am about to enlarge the debt somewhat."

"Ned, my boy, what do you think of that bit of femininity that came with me in the coach to-day? Nifty—eh?"

The Sportive Sport made no reply to this insolent speech.

"Oh, well, silence gives assent. And then, you know, I caught a glimpse of your face when she thanked you for saving her guardian from the Handsome Man—that fair Apollo! Ha! ha! ha! I saw your face, and inferred that her loveliness of person and grace of manners, and all that sort of thing, had impressed your susceptible heart not differently from my own."

"Now, Edward, it is an untoward fatality that has a second time interested both you and me in the same person. But what would you have me do? I want her as bad as you do."

"I got the other one; and you've been on the shoot about it ever since."

"You gave me a pretty loud shake for this one; but, chum, I'm bound to win. And, between old friends, you know, I'll tell you how I'm going to work the little racket."

"The beauteous damsel lies sleeping in the moated grange, her window opening on a balcony, in this instance represented by a shanty lean-to, easily accessible from the ground. A lot of my stout knaves enter the castle kitchen (ye bar of ye Metropolitan) and get to brawling over their sack (forty-rod). While attention is centered in this quarter, myself and a few picked and trusty halberdiers scale the wall and make off with the maiden. How's that for a programme, blending romance with reality?"

The Sportive Sport replied not a word to this cold-blooded recital. But his soul was racked by such an agony as even he had never known before, and from his tortured heart went up the cry:

"My God! must I endure this great wrong a second time?"

"But we are losing time," pursued the captain. "I mean to keep you to witness my nuptials with the fair Stella; and then we will see what can be done in the way of giving you a first-class send off."

"Here," addressing his men, "two of you stand guard over him. And understand!—if any one approaches this spot, you are to instantly bury your bowie in his heart to the hilt."

The Sportive Sport was then thrown on his back in a corner.

Old Red Eye, being of no use in the proposed abduction, was made one of the guards, and the captain and his men betook themselves on their unhallowed errand.

Before departing, the Handsome Man stepped up to the helpless prisoner, and, without a word, kicked him in the side with his heavy boot.

The Sportive Sport could not see to whom he owed this cowardly assault.

For a time the prisoner and his guards remained in perfect silence.

From time to time Old Red Eye glanced with evident concern at the motionless form of the captive.

This was detected by the other Death Rider, who scowled suspiciously at the new member.

Presently he asked, gruffly:

"Have ye got any terbacker?"

"Nary terbac'," replied the old bummer—"wish I had."

"Hello!—you in the corner, have *you* got any terbacker?"

The Sportive Sport made no reply to the question evidently addressed to him.

"Yer doggoned savin' o' words," muttered the outlaw; "but I reckon I kin help myself."

Without more ado he began to rummage the prisoner's pockets.

"The blasted snide hain't got a toothful," growled the searcher, evidently disappointed in his quest; "but hyer's what'll buy the animile, you bet!"

And he drew some money from the pocket of the helpless man.

"Look a-hyer, you snoozer!" he continued, addressing Old Red Eye. "I reckon one's enough to guard this party fur a little while. I'm goin' to git some terbacker, an' you kin sock it to him, if any one comes pokin' round before I git back—d'ye onderstand?"

"All right," said Old Red Eye. "An' ef you kin git me so much as a thimbleful o' somethin' warmin' while yer gone—"

"Bet yer boots I never shook a pard."

And the outlaw set out on his errand, gliding away as noiselessly as a shadow.

After perhaps the expiration of a minute, Old Red Eye cautiously whispered:

"Neddie!"

"Is that you, Phil?" asked the Sportive, quickly on the alert.

"You bet," was the laconic reply, as the old bummer removed his mask.

"Are you one of this band?" asked the Sportive with evident disappointment.

"They bagged me not an hour ago, Neddie. It saved my life, an' Sal had kicked me out, an' so I j'ined. You'd orter 'a' seen her, Neddie, arter all I've done fur that woman! I know thar wouldn't many stand by an old bloke like me; but I've sot a heap by Sal, an' the day has been that she'd 'a' fared hard if it hadn't been fur me. An' now she's chucked me into the gutter!"

Old Red Eye was again overcome by his grief.

"Phil," said the Sportive, after a pause, "are you going to let me lie here until that man comes back?"

"Do ye think that o' me, Neddie?" said the old bummer, reproachfully. "They'll send me up the flume when they l'arn I've gone back on 'em, but my ole life hain't no account ag'in' what I owe you. You've always been good to me, Neddie; an' now I'm going to show you that I don't furgit—"

"Your oath, you blasted traitor! Wal, you hain't the only one that don't furgit. So, *die!*"

The outlaw, whose going for tobacco had only been a ruse, leveled his pistol at Old Red Eye and fired, before his contemplated treachery could be accomplished.

CHAPTER XVI.

A COUPLE OF DIPLOMATS.

WHEN Bryan o' Balleyhoolagan and Julius Cæsar Apollonius Griggs learned that Stella was at the Metropolitan Hotel they were in a quandary just how to act.

Said Pat to Sam, in a confidential whisper:

"Sure, no less could be expected av us than to pay our respects to her."

"Yes," assented Sam; "an' it 'pears to me dat we ought to 'dole wid her dat Massa Haveland's done been left in de han's ob de Philistines!"

"More power to yez, me b'yl Faith, it's yersilf that's hit the nail on the head. We'll condole wid her—that's what we will!" cried Pat, in great delight at the idea. "But what will we say, I dunno?"

"Oh, dat'll come to us—"

"Whin we're ferninst her, jist! We'll spake wid the inspirashun of the moment. Whurroo!"

And the enthusiastic Celt cut a pigeon's wing.

Then they set out for the Metropolitan.

After a long pause of meditation, Pat said:

"Julius, me b'y?"

"Well, Bryan?"

"Av she ask were we hurted? Were we hurted, Julius?"

Sam looked thoughtful a moment.

"Dah's that scab on my leg," he ventured, presently.

"Troth, that won't do—it's a wake owld."

"Den dah's a stunbruise on my heel."

"Arrah, be 'asy! Faith, we'll tell her we were shot sive-ral times apace, but the bullets didn't take effect."

Sam scratched his head a little dubiously.

"P'raps dat'll do," he said.

"Do!" repeated Pat. "Sure that's the way they always have it in the papers."

Stella received them in her room.

They found her with tears still wet on her cheeks.

"Oh, Sam," she cried, glad to see a familiar face, however humble, "what will become of Guardie—dear old Guardie! Those terrible men will not stop at murder, or anything."

"Missy Stella, don't ye say nuffin'! Dis chile's jist done gone bu'sted. 'Pears like he'd like jist to lay down an' die! —'clar' to goodness, it do! Boo! hoo! hoo! Ef he could only hyear Massa Haveland callin' out—'Sam!'"

Sam blubbered without disguise.

Pat was too dignified for so demonstrative a display of feeling. Throwing his weight first on one foot and then on the other, and shifting his hat from hand to hand, he looked toward all parts of the room and the floor and ceiling in succession, his face distorted by most ludicrous grimaces indicative of desperate efforts to repress the inclination to smile.

"Pat, aren't you sorry for your master?" asked Stella.

"Och hone! ma'am—it's the devil's own—worruck—so it is!" cried Pat, brokenly. "Sure, both Julius an' mesilf would have laid down our lives—"

"Yes, dat's it. We laid down our lives, bofe ob us!"

"Yis, ma'am, av we could have been anny service to yez at all, ma'am. Faith, me hairt was broke wid the danger yez was in, ma'am."

"Yes, de danger was awfull! De bullets come dat t'ick, we was so skeered—"

"Divil a wan av us!—barrin' and savin' yer prisence, ma'am!"

Had she not been so full of anxiety, Stella would have laughed at the contrast between Pat's hot repudiation of Sam's slip of the tongue and the humility of his apology.

He went on quickly:

"It was asy to be seen that we could do yez no good ag'in so manny, so we futed it all the way to Idaho, fur help, d'ye moid."

"Yes, Missy Stella. Golly, we run fur dat help—"

"Be 'asy, you divil!" muttered Pat, behind his hat.

In a louder tone to Stella he said:

"But don't ye worry, ma'am. In the morning we'll git a party together, an' woe betide the poor divil we catch!"

"Oh, yes. We'll have Massa Haveland out o' dat before breakfas'. Won't we, Bryan?"

"Well, you may go now," said Stella, quietly. "I'm sure your intentions are good, and I thank you."

As quick as they were well out of the room, Sam turned to his companion:

"Hyah! hyah! How's dat? 'Clar' to goodness, dah's nuffin' in dis sinful world like inspirashin."

"Aw! to the devil wid yez!" cried Bryan, in great disgust. "Was it yer inspirashin that would tell her we was scart, I dunno?"

"Oh! we was skeered fur dem, ye know, dat dey git hurt."

"Aw! Bedad, an' perhaps that was the r'ason we run?"

"Well, wasn't we in a hurry to git dat help?"

"It's all right! it's all right! but don't yez spake to me niver again!"

And in high dudgeon Pat walked into the hotel bar.

With his nose in the air and his hands under his coat-tails, he was a picture of offended dignity and righteous indignation.

Sam followed with a crestfallen air. He felt that his faulty diplomacy had compromised himself and his colleague.

In the absence of the Sportive Sport, our humble friends

were taken up and lionized by the crowd, who got from them a new and entirely novel account of the affair.

Under the influence of the liquor to which they were treated, the personal difference which had clouded their entrance to the room was soon lost sight of, and for an hour they were the center of amusement for the loungers in the bar-room.

The sport was at its height when angry words were heard in one corner of the room.

"Curse it!" cried a voice, "you don't take my money in that way, you know!"

The plot to abduct Stelia Raymond was initiated!

The angry retort followed instantly.

Then a man rose to his feet and hurled a glass at his adversary, shivering it to atoms against the wall.

With a crash the table was overturned.

Then the men clinched and went writhing about the room, snarling like wild beasts.

"A fight! a fight!" cried Pat, and seized the hickory poker which stood behind the stove.

However much he may have subordinated valor to discretion in a pistol and bowie-knife fight, when it came to a rough-and-tumble knock-down-and-drag-out he was perfectly at home.

In a wonderfully short time every man on the premises was attracted to the scene of conflict.

Then through the house rung the piercing scream of some woman in dire distress!

CHAPTER XV.

A BOLD ABDUCTION.

THE Metropolitan Hotel was a two-story structure, differing from the other buildings of the "shanty town" only in size. The stable, instead of being behind the hotel, as it might have been in a more closely built up settlement, was at one side, fronting also on the street.

In the absence of fences, there was no obstruction between the rear of the hotel and the chaparral, which was but a few paces distant.

Here the Death Riders tied their horses, and then crept warily toward the hotel.

Those who were to draw attention to the bar-room went there, while the captain, the Handsome Man, Featherfoot, Seaford, Lane and One-Eye lurked in the shadow of the house.

Mounting on the backs of their comrades, the captain and Featherfoot reached the roof of the lean-to.

Noiselessly they crept up the incline to a window which was faintly illuminated, a white curtain being drawn across the lower sash.

"Curse her! if she's awake, she may give us difficulty," muttered the captain.

"You can never tell till you see," was the philosophic rejoinder.

"We'll devilish soon do that." And cautiously the captain peered over the curtain.

"She's asleep in her chair, by all that's lucky!" he muttered, ducking his head again.

Featherfoot looked.

It was long past midnight, and the girl had wept herself to sleep in her chair.

"Now, if those galoots would only begin!" growled the captain.

As if in response to his words, a sound of disturbance was borne to his ears.

"There they go!" he whispered.

"Now is our time," breathed Featherfoot.

"Is she awakened by the row?"

"No."

"Raise the window, and I'll slip in."

"You have the chloroform ready?"

"Yes, of course."

"All right then. Now!"

Noiselessly Featherfoot raised the window

The captain brushed aside the curtain and glided into the room.

The girl opened her eyes, leaped from her seat and brought the chair between herself and the intruder.

"Who are you? What do you want?" she asked, in a terrified voice.

"I beg your pardon, madam," said the captain, removing his hat with an air of great deference. "Do not cry out. It was necessary for me to come to you as I have done, not to harm you, but to save you from a most subtle enemy."

"What enemy?"

"The man who calls himself the Sportive Sport."

"Edward Gary? He has proved himself my friend."

"Edward Gary, Slippery Sam, Red Lightning, Monte Joe, The Spotter, or whatever else he chooses to call himself, pretended to rescue you, when he himself was at the bottom of the whole plot. Was it not noticeable that nobody was killed?"

All this while the girl had been scanning the captain, breathlessly.

"Stop!" she suddenly cried. "I recognize you, David Arbuckle!"

The captain started. He had trusted too much to his disguise.

His disconcertion was but momentary, however.

"Miss Raymond," he said, with well-simulated humility, "I had hoped to aid you without letting you know who it was that was watching over you. I need not explain the motives—"

"No, *Mrs. Kimball*, your motives are sufficiently apparent!"

The girl's eyes flashed scornfully.

"The jig's up!" muttered the captain, under his breath.

With a bound he cleared the intervening space and clutched his victim.

The girl uttered a piercing scream.

The next instant a sponge saturated with chloroform was held over her nose and mouth.

After an instant's frantic struggle she saved him further trouble by fainting away.

Hurried footsteps and confused voices came along the hall.

A heavy hand pounded an imperative summons on the door, after trying it and finding it locked.

"Hallo, in thar! Open the door."

Featherfoot now showed quick presence of mind.

"Hallo, yourself!" he cried, in a sleepy voice. "What are ye kickin' up such a devilish row fur?"

"What's that woman screamin' about?"

"Go to thunder! Thar hain't no woman in hyer."

"Is this the room?" asked a voice in the hall.

"O' course it's the room. Cave the door in," replied a woman's voice.

By this time the captain had borne his unconscious burden through the window and down the roof of the lean-to.

"Here! Take her!" he said, hurriedly, to the Handsome Man, who stood just under the eaves.

"Lower away!" was the response.

The girl was dropped into his arms, and he immediately set off at a run toward the grove where the horses were secured.

The captain dropped to the ground, closely followed by Featherfoot.

At that instant there was a crash in the room above.

A heavy body had been hurled against the door, and burst it in.

"Thar's nobody hyer," cried a gruff voice.

"See! The window is open! They've carried her off!" cried a woman.

"After 'em, fellers!"

A man's head was thrust out of the window, which was further obscured by others crowding behind him.

He discerned shadowy forms just vanishing in the darkness.

There were several quick flashes and reports.

The fugitives gave back no response.

"Git out on the lean-to," cried a voice.

Several crowded through the window, and slid down the roof to the ground.

Others were now issuing from the back door of the hotel.

They stood in the darkness, with nothing to indicate the direction taken by the bold abductors.

At that instant from the chaparral came a clear, ringing voice, in mocking tones!

"WHEN WANTED, I AM ALWAYS ON HAND!"

This challenge was followed by rapid pistol-shots, oaths, cries and the plunging of horses.

CHAPTER XVI.

ONCE MORE "ON HAND."

ALBEIT a hopeless sot, Old Red Eye had "been thar!" In moments of great emergency an almost superhuman effort of will counteracted the infirmities of body induced by long indulgence in strong drink, and the celerity of movement acquired during the years he had been "on the shoot" manifested itself.

Taken by surprise, he yet made an effort to leap to one side, so that the ball which otherwise would have pierced his heart lodged in his left shoulder.

His retort was almost instantaneous, and the outlaw fell to the ground as dead as a dog, with a small perforation just between the eyes.

"By Jove! old man, you haven't forgotten how to shoot!" cried the Sportive, enthusiastically. "That was as handsome a shot as I ever witnessed."

"They'll take it out o' me," said Old Red Eye, calmly; "but since I git you out o' the mud I don't keer. Let 'em drive ahead as fast as they want to."

And with his bowie-knife he cut the ligatures that bound his friend.

"Don't be so sure of that," said the Sportive, as he regained his feet. "There's men enough in the town to protect you from all the road-agents between here and the Pacific."

"No," said Old Red Eye, "I shan't go back on 'em any further. I've took my oath, and I stand to it. I wouldn't 'a' done so much, only to save your life. You've always been good to me, Neddie. You hain't like the rest."

"But you know these men now. Tell their names, and we'll have them all up to-day in no time."

"No. You're free. That's all I'll do."

"But do you mean that you join yourself with that band of cut-throats?"

"Wal, I reckon they're all cut-throats, mostly. I don't see much difference. I never got nothin' but kicks. I've run the respectable dodge until it has run me into the ground. Now I'm goin' to try the other thing a spell."

"But you will be murdered instantly for treachery."

"An idee on that head has jest popped into my knowledge-box."

"What idea, pray?"

"Wal, I'll give 'em a stiff, an' ef it goes down, I'm all right. Ef it don't work, I pass in my checks all reg'lar. What's the difference to me? Now Sal's shook me, what have I got to live fur? Whar'd I go, I'd like to know?"

"But how will you account for my escape?"

"Suppose you tie me up, an' they find me so? I'll tell 'em you managed to slip yer hands free, an' when that galoot bent over you to go through yer clo's fur terbacker, you grabbed his pistol, and let him have it in the top-piece. When I jumped fur ye, you give me this pill in the shoulder. Then while you held the drop on me, you made me ground arms and stand at rest while you freed yer feet. It ain't your game to kill old men in cold blood, so you tie me up to keep me out o' the way while you try to sarcumvent them in their leetle game ag'in' the gal."

The Sportive Sport had little hope of moving the old man, but he made a last appeal.

"Will nothing dissuade you from this?"

"No," was the dogged response. "I'm going to pay back some o' the kicks I've got, if I get a chance!"

"Well, I'll do the best I can for yon, then," said the Sportive.

Tearing a page from his note-book he wrote the following:

"I give you the life of this old vagabond, because he is not worth the powder to blow him up. If he is any accession to your accursed band, take him, with the compliments of one who will not be so lenient when he holds respectable game in his power. When *least* wanted *by you*, you will find me—

ALWAYS ON HAND."

Tying the old bumper securely, he pinned this message to his breast, and left him to his fate, hastening away to frustrate the villainous plot against the woman who was dearer to him than his life.

The Sportive Sport had the advantage of knowing the main points of the plot. He easily guessed that horses would be used and where they would probably be stationed.

He was nearing the hotel when sounds of strife proceed-

ing from the bar-room showed him that the plot was already in operation.

At a venture he bent his course directly toward the chapparal.

As he reached the grove he heard the restless movements of horses and knew that he was on the right track.

Gliding among the trees he saw shadowy forms, and heard a low voice commanding, hurriedly:

"Here! Give her to me!"

Two men were about to lift a burden to the back of a horse already bearing a rider.

"WHEN WANTED, I AM ALWAYS ON HAND!"

The Sportive Sport's voice rung out clear and exultant.

The man in the saddle uttered an oath and dug his spurs into his horse's flanks, so that the animal leaped forward with a neigh of pain.

Of the men who held the unconscious girl, the nearest turned to face the challenger. He was a burly ruffian, and presented a fair mark.

At this instant the Sportive's pistol spoke.

The man let go his hold on the girl, raised his hand to his breast and reeled.

The other ruffian ran.

The girl, for want of support, fell to the ground.

There was a moment of wild confusion—the rapid exchange of shots, the plunging of horses and the cries of men.

When the crowd of men from the hotel reached the spot all was still, save the sound of rapidly retreating horsemen.

"Strike a light!" cried one.

"Hallo! What the deuce is this? I've stumbled onto something. A stiff, by thunder!"

"Look out, hyer! What's this?"

Several matches began to burn blue.

"The gal, by all that's lovely!"

"Is she dead, or fainted?"

"Them devils may have shot her, seein' their game was blowed."

"Fainted, most likely."

"And hyer's the Sportive."

"They've done his business fur him."

"Fellers, somebody's got to swing fur this!"

"The whitest man in these diggin's, I swear!"

"That's a doggone shame!"

"Lift him up."

"Give him air."

"Hyer, take him into the hotel."

"It's in the head. He's done fur!"

"Howly Moses! Is it the swate mistress, I dunno?"

"Fo' de Lo'd! dat's Missy Stella, shore!"

"Aw, the divils! Here, Julius. We'll take her in, will we? If she's hurt, divil swape me, but there'll be trouble, so there will!"

"Bryan, dem Deff Riders better make 'emselves ska'se roun' dis hyere town! Ef dey wake up dis chile, he broke somefin', shore!"

Side by side they were borne into the hotel, she as white as a lily, he stained by his own blood. But ah! how proudly, how gladly he would have shed every drop in her defense!

Stella had fainted before the chloroform which the captain of the Death Riders had sought to administer had time to take any effect. The usual restoratives soon brought her back to consciousness.

The glib tongue of the landlady of the hotel lost no time in imparting to her the story of her rescue and the price of blood the Sportive Sport had paid in her behalf.

The girl started to her feet with blanched lips.

"Shot! Is he dead?" she asked, in an awed whisper.

"I don't know. The doctor's with him," replied her hostess.

"Where is he?"

"In the front room."

"I must go to him at once."

"Oh, no. You needn't worry. They'll bring him round, no doubt. A man 'll stand a good deal of killin'."

"I understand nursing; I may be of service," said Stella, with quiet resolution, walking toward the door.

"Goodness gracious! you're weak yourself. It would be more like it if you had a nurse."

"I will go. Will you accompany me?"

"Why, yes, of course, if you're bound to go."

"Let us lose no more time, then."

A knot of men were gathered about the room door, talking in low tones, their lowering looks sufficiently indicative of their feelings.

They looked curiously at the pale-faced girl, and made way for her respectfully, opening the door for her to enter. She looked into the room.

Several men were gathered about the bed, the doctor being distinguishable by his superior dress.

With her hand over her heart the girl advanced into the room.

CHAPTER XVII.

NANCY'S CHARGE.

"WELL, Doc, I'm not ready for the long box yet?"

"Not by any manner of means. A day or two of quiet will place you on your pins again, as good as new."

"A question or two. The lady was not injured?"

"Not a scratch."

"Was *all* of my ammunition wasted?"

"There's a man down-stairs who wouldn't think so, if he wasn't past all thinking."

"If they think that one of their worthless lives is sufficient compensation for the shock Miss Raymond must have sustained, to say nothing of the outrage of such an assault, they are very much mistaken! How many hours does it lack of sunrise?"

"Three."

"Tell somebody to have my horse ready at that time."

"Have your horse ready?"

"Exactly."

"But you do not think of using him so soon?"

"I shall lead the party in pursuit of the Death Riders, as agreed."

"That's plucky, but I doubt its wisdom."

"I haven't time to be wise. Good-night."

And the Sportive Sport turned over to sleep.

At that moment Stella entered the room.

She saw the bandage on his head. His face was turned away.

"Doctor," she said, "I have come to offer myself as nurse."

At the sound of that voice the Sportive Sport turned his head suddenly and regarded the girl with an indescribable look.

In that look there was love pure and simple, joy at her recovery, and an eager questioning that sought to read her soul.

As for the girl, the sudden reaction of seeing him so well and strong when she had feared the worst came upon her like a shock, so that she could not wholly repress a startled cry.

The next instant her face was transfigured by a smile that would have warmed the heart of an anchorite.

Impulsively she started forward and clasped his hand between both of hers.

"Oh! you are not dangerously hurt," she said. "I am so—"

And here she stopped, blushing in confusion.

With ready wit the Sportive Sport came to her relief.

"Don't mention it," he said. "You owe me no thanks for such a little matter!"

From that moment there was a new link between them. He had protected her from the strangers standing round.

Gratitude had not given form to her unfinished sentence; but availing herself of this avenue which his tact had opened to her maiden modesty, she said:

"Is it nothing that you have twice jeopardized your life for me in one night?"

"Any one of these gentlemen would have done as much had they had the chance."

Thus the Sportive gave a very graceful turn to the conversation.

The faces of all lighted up.

"You bet!" exclaimed one, giving terse, if not altogether elegant expression to the general sentiment.

Stella turned and bowed to them.

"At any rate," she said, again addressing the wounded man, "you will not deny me the pleasure of attending you until you are well?"

So it would be a pleasure to attend upon him?

The Sportive's heart glowed at the thought.

"If I stood in need of nursing," he said, devouring her

with his eyes, "be assured that I should require no other medicine than your presence. But I shall be on my feet again after two or three hours' sleep—a thing quite as necessary for you as for me. Will you let me thank you for your kind offer? And if you think that any return is due me for such service as I may have been to you, oblige me by consulting your own needs at once."

"You are too kind," she said, blushing with pleasure. "I will do as you wish."

The words, simple in themselves, were accompanied by a look which said that his will was her law.

Bowing to the others, she left the room directly.

The Sportive followed her with his eyes.

When she had disappeared, he said:

"Good-night, gentlemen."

And turned his face to the wall, as if to sleep.

But in his heart was a new well-spring of strength which seemed to make sleep unnecessary.

He was up with the sun, albeit pale, yet walking with his wonted firm step.

The "Committee" were in readiness, too.

Several were gathered about the body of the man who had been killed the night before.

It lay in an unused shed.

The Handsome Man was declaiming loudly.

"I tell ye what it is, gents," he was saying, "I was considerable chawed up when I stumbled on that carcage. Why, I reckon I've knowed Jim Seaford fur five year. He always seemed a square-toed galoot—I leave it to the crowd. Who'd 'a' thought he belonged to that infernal crowd? But, pard, this hyar's a doggone quare world. You mostly can't tell who's who until they git's ketched."

"Boss, you're a-shoutin'!" was the reply of one who wished to express his concurrence in this bit of philosophy.

Having his own ideas on that subject, the Sportive turned away to meet Stella.

"I wish to leave you in a place of safety while I am gone," he said, after the first greetings. "In many respects it is far from being desirable as the abode of a lady of refinement; but it has this one recommendation which is of first importance just now—the roughest characters in this rude section would hesitate to assail you there."

"I place myself at your disposal," said the girl. "I have every confidence in your judgment; and I will not allow little things to annoy me."

"I purpose to place you under the protection of a woman who will shock you in many ways; but beneath her rude exterior there is genuine kindness of heart. From girlhood she has been surrounded by the roughest characters which a mining town can produce; and for self-protection it is necessary that she should make them stand in awe of her, until now there are few men who would willingly arouse her to anger."

Stella's curiosity was greatly awakened, and it was not lessened in any degree by a sight of her future custodian.

"Nance," said the Sportive, "I have brought this lady, Miss Raymond, here as the safest place in Idaho. You know of the two attempts to kidnap her. You alone, in my absence, can prevent a repetition of them. I trust her to you, knowing that you will not fail me."

Something like a blush of pleasure came into Nance's face. It was not lessened when Stella frankly took her hand, saying:

"I too feel confidence in you already."

"Wal, ma'am," said Nance, visibly embarrassed, "I allow you hain't fur out o' yer reckonin'. As fur Mr. Gary, hyere, he knows me like a book. When I say 'Cheese it!' they mostly come down around these diggin's. Mr. Gary, thar, will back that with rocks."

Stella strove not to look the surprise she felt at this to her ears unfamiliar address. Without being at all clear as to details, she conceived a vague general notion that Nance was proclaiming herself "chief."

The Sportive suppressed a smile, as he saw Stella's conflicting emotions.

To Nance he said:

"Yes, Nance, I have every confidence in your ability and will."

"It makes me feel my own weakness," said Stella, "to be dependent upon another woman for protection; but here everything is so strange."

"Yes, ma'am," said honest Nance, "I expect you do find things mostly a leetle beyond your figers! Thar's a few galoots

in this hyere section o' country that's got to be swung ur salted—one way or t'other they've got to be thinned out—before things'll be much better. But you kin tie to me, you kin. I'm as square as a die! Some folks thinks I'm an out-an'-outer; but, bless ye! I'm fly. I've lived among 'em ever sence I wa'n't no bigger'n a suckin' shote; an' if any one of 'em tries to bolt me, I reckon he'll think he's got a burr stuck crossways in his throat."

The Sportive Sport now took his leave, as the "Committee" was now ready to set out in quest of the Death Riders, leaving Stella with her strange protector.

It was natural that the girl should be curious to know something about the man who had been of such signal service to her, and in whom she began to take an interest of a different kind.

"The Sportive?" said Nance, in response to Stella's question concerning him; and then feeling somehow that she was unduly familiar in speaking of him thus to this fine lady, she pursued:

"I beg your pardon; but everybody calls Mr. Gary the Sportive, an' when one gits the hang of a thing it's hard to shake it. But, to answer your question, he's the boss man o' this hyar town. To draw the thing down to fine dots, I reckon he's the only galoot in these hyar parts that can hold Californy Sal to the track."

"Ah, he is a fine horseman, you mean?"

"Eh? A horseman?"

"Didn't you speak of his being able to manage a vicious horse?"

"I? I hain't said nothin' about no hoss."

"Why, Californy Sal. You said he was the only one who could hold her to the track. A race-horse, I presume."

"Oh, Lordy! Ha! ha! ha! ha! ho! ho! ho! Californy Sal a hoss! He! he! he! That's good! But ef you'd said a mule, now, you'd 'a' took the rag off the bush, fur rocks! Ha! ha! ha! Thar's whar the laugh *would* 'a' come in. A hoss! No, Sal ain't no hoss. She's worse'n ary hoss you ever see! She calcalates as how she's a woman; but thar's nothin' mild about Sal! She's chief o' this hyar ranch; and allows that the most o' mankind what hangs around hyar has to take water when she gits on one o' her tears. Oh, you'll see Sal fast enough. But ef she opens her head to ye, I reckon she'll hyear from me! I calcalate she'll treat ye white; fur although in ginerall she ain't afeared o' man nor devil, she don't run afoul o' the Sportive no more than she kin help."

"Wal, Nance Quigg, you've give me a perty fair settin' out, hain't ye?"

Stella started at the harsh voice.

In her regulation dress—or undress—with petticoat *coif-four*, the Hell-cat stood in the doorway!

CHAPTER XVIII.

OLD RED EYE IS ENTANGLED IN HIS OWN SNARE.

AFTER their precipitate flight from the chaparral back of the Metropolitan Hotel, the Death Riders reassembled at a rendezvous known to them all.

"Well!" said the captain, looking round on his followers.

"We're sold out!" declared the Handsome Man, with a savage oath.

"I'd pit Placer Joe against any man in the land for fidelity," said the captain.

"It's that blasted bummer, Old Red Eye."

"But he'd have to get away with Joe first. How could such an old stoughton-bottle do that?"

"You tell."

The captain looked reflective.

The Handsome Man suddenly burst forth:

"My way would 'a' been to put a final quietness on that devil while he was under your thumb."

"That wasn't mine!" said the captain, with quiet authority.

"Come," he added, briskly. "The quickest way to settle this matter is to repair to the place from which our prisoner escaped."

The Handsome Man followed his superior, sullenly.

They found Old Red Eye just as the Sportive had left him.

"Well, what's the meaning of this?" demanded the captain.

"You left us to guard a stock o' greased lightnin', an' it got away with us—that's all," replied Old Red Eye.

"You cussed traitor, you let him loose," said the Handsome Man, savagely.

"My Christian friend," said Old Red Eye, nonchalantly, "you're prejudiced ag'in' me, because I interfered when you was goin' to spile Nance's ginerall usefulness fur this wicked world."

Then turning to the captain, he went on:

"Cap'n, d'ye think this looks very much as if I let the Sportive off? I'raps I shot myself in the shoulder, an' tied myself up in his place, an' pinned this note to my breast. P'raps I done all that; an' then ag'in, p'raps nobody but a doggoned fool, ur somebody what was bound to git even with me by hook ur by crook, would think o' such a thing."

The captain read the contemptuous note which the Sportive had left. His only comment was a bitter oath.

"What have you got to say about this affair?" he demanded of Old Red Eye. "How could a man, bound as he was, and unarmed, get away from two who had weapons, and were instructed to kill on the first chance of his escape?"

"Wal, it was jest this hyar way," said the old bummer. "That stiff yonder asked me ef I had some terbacker—that was p'raps ten minutes after you left."

"Wal, I says, says I:

"'Nary terbac—wish I had.'

"Then he says, says he:

"'Hallo!—you in the corner, have *you* got any terbacker?'

"An' the Sportive he keeps as mum as an oyster.

"'Yer doggoned savin' o' words,' says t'other, 'but I reckon I kin help myself.'

"An' with that he begun to go through the Sportive's pockets.

"Now, I s'pose the Sportive had somehow managed to work his hands loose; fur as that galoot bent over him, he suddenly made a snatch fur his pistol.

"I see the cuss jump back; an' then the Sportive blazed away. He never misses fire when there's blood in his eye. Yonder stiff went to grass like a lump o' lead.

"Wal, I jumps fur the Sportive quicker'n lightnin'; an' I'll be obliged to ye later ef you'll fish around fur the key-hole he give me quicker'n *greased* lightnin'.

"While he had the drop on me he says, says he:

"'Cheese it, ole man! I didn't go fur to lay you out that time; but you know me, an' I don't stand no foolishin'. Drap that pistol!'

"Wal, gents, you've all hycared him. I reckon you'll all allow that he's a straightforward business man, ef they make 'em. When he said—'Cheese it!' I knowed it had got to be done. Ef I didn't do it, he'd do it fur me, an' right smart too. So I saved him the trouble by obeyin' orders.

"'Have you got a knife?' says he.

"'Yer shoutin',' says I.

"'Come hyere an' cut the cord off o' them feet,' says he. 'An' mind ye don't make no slips. This is a deuced delicate trigger,' says he, in his funny way, 'an' ef you was to startle me, the doggone thing might go off, while it was p'intin' your way.'

"Gents, I cut that cord lookin' straight down the bore of his revolver!

"Then he gits on his feet, an' he says, says he:

"'Ole man, you're a blasted 'ole sinner, an' I reckon some fine mornin' before long an ole galoot of about your general uselessness will be found disgracin' one o' the trees around hyere. But besides that it ain't exactly in my line to butcher such a ramshackle ole wreck as you be, I onderstand that to-day you saved Nance from gittin' prodded bad. Now, I'm goin' to spare you this time to pay fur Nance. More-over I shan't tell anybody what I've found out about you. But mind, this makes us even, an' ef you git ketched ag'in, you'll have to hoe yer own row.'

"With that, he tied me up, as you see, an' lit out. Have you got any fault to find with that? Is there any man in the crowd that wouldn't 'a' done as I done, ef he got ketched in the same fix?"

This was Old Red Eye's defense.

That the captain accepted it appeared in his next words:

"Cut those cords!"

He was immediately obeyed.

Old Red Eye stood a free man.

In pursuance of an equally laconic order those of the Death Riders who were to follow their captain took to horse

The Handsome Man and his particular set turned back toward the heart of the town.

For hours the former party, including Old Red Eye, rode deeper and deeper into the mountain fastnesses.

Toward morning they reached a canyon cut deep in the solid rock by a stream of water.

Riding in the water between the perpendicular walls which rose higher and higher as they advanced, they reached an abrupt wall into which the stream had worn a tunnel large enough to admit a man on horseback.

Following the windings of this cavernous passage, they finally emerged on the other side of the barrier, into a mountain pocket, surrounded on all sides by inaccessible cliffs.

The streamlet lost its waters in a mirror-like lake whose outlet, if any, must have been subterraneous.

That this little paradise had been made the abode of men was evidenced by the existence of several huts on the borders of the lake, so cleverly constructed beneath the trees that they could not be detected from the heights above, while in its subterraneous gateway was stationed a guard of armed men.

This was the stronghold of the Death Riders.

Old Red Eye was conducted to one of the huts, which proved to be that occupied by the captain of the band.

Without loss of time the captain laid before him a letter in old Jasper Haveland's writing.

"Can you counterfeit that writing?" he asked.

"How long have I got to do it in?"

"How long do you want?"

Old Red Eye held up his hand. It shook like a leaf.

"It's a total wreck, you see," he said, with a bitter smile.

"Will a week be time enough?" asked the captain.

"Yes."

"Well, that is your task, then. Learn to imitate that writing and I will give you the note you are to copy. I may as well add that if it is a little shaky it will make no difference. The note you are to write will purport to be from the hand of a man who is weak with wounds."

Old Red Eye began his task, and at the end of the week the captain brought him the following note to be transcribed in characters such as might have been shaped by old Jasper Haveland's hand:

"MY PET:—I have time for but a word. I have escaped from that devil who calls himself the captain of the Death Riders. I am alone in the wilderness, and so weak that I cannot get to you. I should have died, had not the bearer of this note found me out. He says that he is best known as 'Old Red Eye.' Stella, I need your care that I may gather strength to revenge myself on the man who has so nearly compassed my death. But, dear, the greatest secrecy is necessary. If he knew that I was still alive and able to betray his place of concealment, he would fly where he would be beyond my reach. He has confederates all over this wretched country. The first man you addressed might be a creature of his. I know of but one man whom I can trust—he who saved my life in Denver, Edward Gary, or as he is called, 'The Sportive Sport.' Show him this note, if he is in Idaho, and ask him to come with you. If he is not accessible, come alone. For I feel that I must have you, dear, or I shall die. Take no living being into your confidence, if you fail to find Mr. Gary. Old Red Eye will conduct you to me. I am so weak that it has taken me all day to write this.

Your affectionate

"GUARDIE."

The foregoing Old Red Eye copied in lead-pencil on leaves torn from Jasper Haveland's note-book.

Accompanied by the captain and four of his trustiest men, he set out toward Idaho on his treacherous errand.

As he went along, however, he mused.

"Haveland—Haveland. What is there familiar about that name? It has haunted me the whole week. Well, it makes no difference to me who or what he is. I owe him no more than I do the rest of humanity."

It was already dark when they reached the vicinity of the Hell-cat's den.

There they lay in wait until a boy came along the road, whistling loudly to himself, to allay his fears of the darkness.

It was Rooty of the dirty face.

To him Old Red Eye intrusted the note, explaining that he dared not enter the house after Sal's prohibition, but that it was necessary that the note should be given unseen by any one else to the lady who was stopping there.

"Miss Raymond?" asked Rooty.

"Miss who?" repeated Old Red-Eye, with a sudden start.

But at that instant a hand reached out of the darkness and placed a cold pistol-barrel against his temple.

"Yes—yes," he stammered. "Take it at once."

When the boy was gone, the old bummer turned upon the captain of the Death Riders.

"Who is the woman to whom that note was sent? Until now I never thought to ask you."

His whole manner had changed. He was no longer an old bummer, but a man whose whole nature had been suddenly aroused by the contemplation of a terrible tragedy.

The captain saw the awakening of a stern purpose in the man whom he had held as his tool. Without understanding the situation, he hoped to crush the old man by a full revelation, whatever it might signify to him.

With mocking deliberation he said:

"She is Miss Stella Raymond, of Oil City, Pennsylvania, and ward of John Haveland, the wealthy oil-land owner."

"My God!"

Old Red Eye reeled, as if struck a stunning blow.

Suddenly he rallied.

"You devil!" he cried, "do you know what you have made me do?"

"No, nor do I care a curse!"

The old bummer raised his hand like a stern judge

"You have made me betray—"

He broke off suddenly, crying:

"But, great Heaven! it is not yet too late!"

And without more ado he set out toward Californy Sal's saloon at a run.

He had taken not half a dozen steps when the weighted cord flew from the captain's hand, entangled his legs and threw him heavily to the ground.

In an instant the captain was upon him, and had knocked him senseless with the butt of his revolver.

"Here, men! Strip that old fool!" he commanded.

While his order was being executed he removed his own clothes, and immediately donned those lately worn by Old Red Eye. The addition of a wig and false beard transformed him into a fair counterfeit of the old bummer.

Old Red Eye was then borne out of sight.

In his place Stella Raymond's worst enemy awaited her coming.

Would she fall into the villainous snare?

CHAPTER XIX.

THE HELL-CAT'S JEALOUSY.

"WAL, Nance Quigg, you've given me a purty fair settin' out, hain't ye?"

Such was the challenge of the Hell-cat, and her aspect was not a whit less warlike.

Stella shrunk away from her in fear.

Nance instantly bristled with defiance.

"Wal, what air ye goin' to do about it?" she said.

Without replying, Californy Sal eyed Stella from head to foot, with a glance which was any thing but friendly.

"Who's this?" she asked, shortly.

"Miss Stella Raymond," answered Nance.

"Oh! Miss Stella Raymond!" repeated the Hell-cat, sarcastically. "Happy to make yer acquaintance, mum."

And she courtesied in a way that was intended for an insult.

"What does she want hyere?" was her next question.

"She's come to stay!" replied Nance, with a positiveness which was very significant.

"Oh, she's come to stay," repeated the Hell-cat, once more—"whether I like it or not, I suppose. You're very welcome, mum, I'm sure."

And again she courtesied.

"Who brought her hyere?" she pursued in the same aggressive tone.

"A man what usually understands his biz—the Sportive," said Nance.

The Hell-cat's complexion was usually pink, a result of indulgence in the liquor with which she poisoned her customers. At mention of the Sportive's name it suddenly became purple.

Her eyes flashed all over Stella with a baleful glare of jealousy.

"Oh!" she said, slowly, "this is the jade he rescued from the Death Riders twice last night?"

"Look a-hyere, Sal," said Nance, her eyes beginning to

flash ominously, "I reckon it won't set very well, ef he is bekownst to you're callin' of her names. It ain't fur me to tell you that he won't stand on ceremony, ef he ketches you throwin' dirt at his friends."

"An' do you think I'm goin' to have this huzzy in my house?"

"I don't think nothin' about it. I know."

"You Nance!"

"YOU SAL!"

The two women stood glaring at each other.

Each was pale to the lips with fury.

Terrified beyond expression, Stella shrunk into a corner of the room.

The Hell-cat began to pant and snivel.

In that battle of the eye Nance stood as firm as a rock.

Suddenly the former gave way.

"Nance Quigg!" she cried, "I'll show you who runs this shebang! And as fur you, you brazin piece," stamping her foot and shaking her fist at the shrinking girl—"oh, I could scratch yer eyes out! D'ye hear? Ef I don't sp'ile that baby face o' yours—"

The threat was cut short by a sudden gush of tears; and shrieking in hysteria, Californy Sal fell to the floor, where she kicked and screamed to her heart's content.

"Oh! take me away!—take me away!—anywhere out of this terrible house! I cannot stay in it another instant!"

Stella clung in terror to Nance, and sought to drag her from the room.

"Oh, yes you kin stay too," said Nance, reassuringly.

"Don't you be scart of her. She's all blow when she finds that she can't bluff nobody. She's done now. Fur the next week she'll lay up-stairs gruntin' an' groanin' an' playin' off sick."

"But I cannot stay in her house against her will."

"Her will be blowed! I should like to know whose house this is. Old Red Eye put in every blamed cent when it was started, an' I've run the machine ever sense. Yesterday she hustled him out into the street, an' that's all the show he gits. But the day she gives me the grand bounce, I reckon thar'll be a yearthquake sommers about these diggin's!"

"Can't we do something for her?" asked Stella, who could not bear to see even an enemy suffer uncared-for.

"Oh, let her lay," said Nance, nonchalantly. "She'll kick jest about so long, an' when she comes round she'll be all the better for it. The only time we have any peace is when she is laid up fur keeps."

"But isn't it dangerous to leave her so?"

"Pugh! When you've seen her that way as often as I have, you'll say—'Go it, ole gal!'"

"I would try to help her, but I am afraid as death of her."

"Ye don't need to be. I'll lay ye two to one that she don't buck ag'in' the Sportive an' Nance Quigg when they're pullin' the same way!"

"What is she to Mr. Gary?" asked Stella, abruptly, a twinge of jealousy penetrating her breast.

"Wal," said Nance, "she hain't his mother, an' she hain't his sister, an' she hain't his sweetheart—the Lord knows that! But I reckon she thinks the sun raises an' sets it him; an' if any other woman looks at him, she's jest wild That's about the size of it."

"Have you known him long?"

Stella watched Nance's face narrowly; and her accent on the pronoun gave to her question a significance which perhaps honest Nance did not perceive, for she answered off-hand:

"He's been round hyere, off an' on, fur two years; an' I know him fur the whitest man this side o' the States—ur t'other side of 'em either, fur the matter o' that."

A look of relief passed over Stella's face.

At this moment Rooty entered, and said, mysteriously:

"Miss Nance, he wants somethin'."

Nance looked at Stella a moment, reflectively, and then said:

"Miss Raymond, you look to me like the right sort Now, ef you could help a feller-bein' that was down on his luck an' flat on his back, I reckon you wouldn't take it into account that he was a blamed hard crowd. He's a man, anyway, an' he can't raise a finger to help himself?"

"Do I understand you?" asked Stella, not a little puzzled by Nance's peculiar *patois*. "Is there a man sick in the house?"

"They tried to stamp him out, last night. He never was

handsome; an' now he's all chawed up, an' looks like a first-class slaughter-house. I don't know as you kin stand it to look at him—"

"Take me to him at once. I shall be glad of an opportunity to help some one in suffering!"

"I knowed thar wasn't nothin' shabby about you!" said Nance, with evident satisfaction.

And without more ado she led our heroine into the presence of Natty Milliken, whose appearance certainly justified her comparison with "a first-class slaughter house."

CHAPTER XX.

NATTY MILLIKEN INSISTS THAT HE IS NOT A DEAD MAN.

NATTY MILLIKEN was what himself would have called a "total wreck." From head to foot he was covered with cuts and bruises; but, strange to say, he had come forth from the deadly peril of being "stamped out" with whole bones.

"Nance," he said, when she made her appearance at his bedside, "is that you?"

"Yes," she replied.

"What's the matter with me? What makes me so weak?"

"Why, don't you remember? You was stamped out last night?"

"I—was—stamped—out?"

"Yes; the Handsome Man tried to fix you."

"Oh!—the Handsome Man. I do remember, now. Where am I, Nance?"

"Up over the saloon."

"Oh! Did you have me fetched hyere, Nance?"

"Yes. You had a powerful loud call, ole man."

"It was doggoned good of you, Nance, an' I won't furgit it. What did Sal say?"

"I reckon she hain't got much to say ag'in' what I do."

"Has the doctor been to see me?"

"Yes. He'll be back ag'in in half an hour."

"Did he say I was booked?"

"No. He reckoned you'd pull through."

"Nance, I'm dead."

"The deuce you are!"

"To the boys, I mean. I've got an object in it, an' I want you to help me out."

"Pull ahead. What's the row?"

"Put your hand in the breast pocket o' my shirt, an' git my wallet."

"That's out o' there a long time ago, an' in a safe place."

"Do you know what's in it?"

"No. That was none o' my business."

"Yer an honest gal, Nance."

"I calcalates to be."

"Wal, thar's five hundred dollars in that wallet. So ye see I'm fixed to pay as I go."

"All right. Wal, what next?"

"Nance, the Handsome Man meant to kill me."

"I should say so!"

"Ef he thought I hadn't knocked under, he'd finish the job."

"Not in this house!"

"He'd try it, any way. Thar's more dependin' on it than you know. Now, I want everybody to think I'm dead, until I git well. Then ef I don't make the fur fly in some quarters, I lose my guess!"

"Jest as you say. It's your funeral, not mine."

Natty Milliken turned uneasily and caught a glimpse of Stella.

"Hullo!" he exclaimed, "ain't thar somebody behind you?"

"A lady that'll nurse you, if you'll let her."

"Won't she peach?"

"Didn't I say she was a lady?"

"Beg pardon, ma'am. No offense. But thar's a heap dependin' on it's not leakin' out that I'm kickin'."

"You may depend on my not betraying you," said Stella.

"An' thar's the Hell-cat—she'll have to be in the secret. Nance, you can buy her up on the best terms you kin make."

"I'll fix that."

And so it came to pass that while Stella Raymond was nursing Natty Milliken back to health and strength, the outside world supposed him a dead man. Nobody took the trouble to inquire what disposition had been made of his body. If they thought about it at all, they took it for

granted that "the carcass" had been "chucked under ground" in the night.

This was the more easily effected, since in the greater interest attaching to the formation of a Vigilance Committee, Natty and his fate were lost sight of.

Stella by her gentleness won upon Natty's gratitude, and when he listened to her story of the attack on the coach and the carrying of her guardian into captivity, he said, mysteriously:

"Never you mind, Miss Raymond. That thing 'll come round all right—mark my word! Jest you wait until I git well. Ef I don't fix things you kin call me a liar!"

Stella set this down as braggadocio. If the Sportive failed to "fix things," she had little confidence in Mr. Milliken.

For five days the "Committee" ransacked hill and dale for traces of the Death Riders and their prisoners with absolutely no results.

In this quest the Handsome Man took a leading part.

After the third day, men who had pressing business duties, or whose zeal flagged, began to fall out of the ranks and go home. At the beginning of the sixth day the remnant of the "Committee" voted the expedition a failure, and abandoned it.

One man declared that he would not desist until success or death had settled the matter one way or the other.

It was the Sportive Sport.

This much reached Stella. And now she thought of him as threading the mazes of the wilderness alone.

How brave he must be to face alone the unknown dangers that must beset his path!

She experienced a sense of pride in him, along with the outflow of gratitude.

But when she thought of him perhaps waylaid, overpowered and slain by the very men he was hunting, then her heart quailed, and she longed to share his peril, or dissuade him from so hazardous an undertaking.

In such moments her heart was revealed to her, and she knew that she loved this man who was almost a stranger to her.

The Handsome Man had returned to Idaho with the discouraged "Committee," and then gone about his business, nobody knew or cared whither. Two days later, the seventh since the formation of the Committee, he reappeared.

He was as boisterous and aggressive as ever, but in his manner a close observer might have detected a covert watchfulness—a certain apprehensive unrest.

Natty Milliken kept posted as to the movements of his enemy.

"Meanwhile," he said, "I'm a dead man!"

Then he compressed his lips with a smile that was not at all pleasant to see, and so lay for a long time in perfect silence.

Perhaps there was a surprise in store for the Handsome Man!

CHAPTER XXI.

A VIAL OF VITRIOL.

For three or four days after her fit of hysterics the Hell-cat played the invalid and martyr. Then she changed her tactics, and began to make overtures of amity to Stella.

Nance saw this and put the girl on her guard.

"They didn't miss it far when they called Sal a Hell-cat. Keep yer eye peeled. When she purrs she's gettin' ready to claw ye."

Stella treated Sal civilly, but was constantly on the watch.

When the girl was looking the woman fawned; but the instant her eyes were turned away, then the Hell-cat followed her with a feline watchfulness, and into her eyes came a gloating hate and a deadly purpose.

After his final return Californy Sal managed to procure an interview with the Handsome Man. That it might be without witnesses, she watched her chance and confronted him in the deserted road a mile from any house.

The Handsome Man stopped when he saw her, and getting his weapons in readiness regarded her suspiciously.

"Look a-hyer, my angel," he said, "you've been doggin' me from pillar to post about long enough. Now, what the devil do you mean?"

"Spanish Dave," said the woman, steadily, "when you hate anybody you try to kill 'em, don't you?"

"That's my leetle game! Do you propose to foller with me fur a subject?"

"No. I hain't got nothin' ag'in' you—I never had."

"Glad to hear it. One can't always know about such little things, you know. By the way, before we go any further, whatever became o' Natty Milliken?"

"I don't know. Nance shoved him, I reckon. I wouldn't 'a' touched the carrion fur his weight in gold."

"All right. I hain't partic'lar, so long as he's under ground. Now, shove ahead."

"Dave, thar's somebody I do hate, worse'n you hated Natty Milliken."

"That's a good deal, ole gal."

"Wal, it's so. An' I don't want to kill her."

"Her!—a woman, then?"

"Yes."

"Nance?"

"No. *That doll-baby that's been in my house fur a week!*"

Words cannot describe the intense malignity with which this sentence was hissed forth.

The Handsome Man executed a prolonged whistle.

"Californy Sal," he said, "*you* never was a doll-baby, within my recollection, at least. Jest now, I reckon you'd make a first-class Chinese idol."

"Thank you fur nothin', Mr. Dave! I don't set up to be a doll-baby, ef you please. But ef it's good looks that wins, I reckon I'd hold my own with you."

"Haw! haw! haw! haw!" laughed Spanish Dave, uproariously. "Blast my eyes ef we wouldn't make a purty pair! Ho! ho! ho—o—o!"

"Cheese it, Dave!" said the Hell-cat, impatiently. "I hain't follered you out hyar to see who could be funniest. I mean business."

"No offense, ole gal. Now, drive ahead."

"Wal, I hate that purty-faced gal; an' instead of rubbin' her out, I want to spile her beauty. That's my lay!"

"Ah! I savy. But why in blazes don't ye go ahead an' do it?"

"I can't do it without bein' found out."

"Do ye want me to work the racket?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"Dave, I've got a bottle o' vitriol, an' I want you to wash her face fur her!"

The Handsome Man started and uttered a sharp oath.

Then he began to pace back and forth, striking his hands together, in evident excitement.

"Air you afraid?" asked the Hell-cat, after watching him a moment in a puzzled way.

"Afraid!" exclaimed Spanish Dave, stopping suddenly and clutching her arm. "I ain't afraid of man nor devil!"

And he scowled in her face in a manner that made even her quail.

"Californy Sal!" he cried, suddenly, "I don't love you overmuch—you hain't the purtiest woman in these parts—but jest now I could hug ye, I swear to gracious, I could!"

"Wal, you needn't try it out! But what's the matter with ye? Hlave ye gone clean crazy?"

"Yes, I have. An' I'll never be straight ag'in until I've emptied that bottle o' vitriol!"

"Why, what have you got ag'in' the gal?" asked Sal, in surprise.

"Got ag'in' her? Nothin'! But—Wal, never you mind. Jest you furnish the vitriol, an' tell me how I kin git at the gal, an' the thing's done!"

In his excitement the Handsome Man again began to pace up and down the road.

"Blast ye! I'll git you now!" he muttered. "It stuck me to see how I could git hunk, an' now it's right hyar, ready to my hand!"

Again he stopped before Sal.

"How can it be done—when?" he demanded, impatiently.

"Maybe to-night," said the Hell-cat.

"The sooner the better! Now, how?"

"She hain't so skeery as she was. Sometimes she goes out back o' the house star-gazin'. If you lay fur her in the chaparral, you kin git away with her to-night or to-morrow night, sure."

"Where's the vitriol?"

"Hyere!"

Californy Sal extended the vial with the gloating eagerness of a fiend.

The Handsome Man clutched it like a ghoul.

"Now git!" he snarled, savagely.

"You bet!" was the laconic response; and she sped away chuckling.

For the remainder of the day the Hell-cat watched Stella with a savage ferocity that was scarcely human. Her fingers worked like claws, and the lips drew back from her teeth.

"Oh! if I could only tell her!" she muttered, feeling an almost uncontrollable impulse to anticipate the triumph of the evening.

That night Stella received the forged letter from Rooty.

At sight of the writing she turned faint. When she had read it she was almost beside herself with conflicting emotions.

Her first impulse was to make a confidant of Nance. But that was prohibited; and as she never for an instant questioned that the letter was from her guardian, so she did not entertain the idea of going contrary to his expressed wishes.

The Sportive Sport was not to be found.

She must go alone!

She had no thought of personal danger. Her guardian, weak as was indicated even by his tremulous chirography, called to her.

Gliding to her room, she made a small bundle of such things as she thought would be most imperatively needed, not forgetting a small flask of spirits.

On receiving the note from Rooty, she had learned who Old Red Eye was and where he was waiting for her.

Now she watched her chance, and, without a word to Nance or any one else, glided out of the back door into the night.

Just within the edge of the chaparral Spanish Dave lay in wait. He saw the figure of a woman hastening toward his place of concealment. Over her head was thrown a white and pink shawl, a dainty affair of soft wool which he had seen Stella wear before.

The vitriol, contained in a wide-mouthed vial, he held ready in his hand. As he saw the woman he drew the cork and crouched closer in the shadows, with a muttered imprecation.

"Now, my haughty captain, I'll touch you in the tenderest spot! When you marry this gal, you'll git a blasted purty bride!"

So intense was his jealous hatred of his superior, and so eager his desire to wound him by disfiguring the woman on whom he had fixed his heart, that he could scarcely contain himself while she rapidly approached the spot where her doom awaited her.

As she came within arm's-length he suddenly arose, and without warning dashed the contents of the vial full in her face.

The woman started back with a gasping cry, pressing her hands to her eyes, as the fiery liquid instantly attacked their sensitive tissues.

The next instant the shawl had been wrapped about her head and face, precluding any further outcry.

But she had recognized her assailant; for she had pronounced his name.

As Spanish Dave heard it, he uttered an oath of concentrated terror.

One moment he hesitated, holding his victim in an iron grasp. Then drawing his bowie-knife he plunged it to the hilt in her breast.

With a convulsive shudder she sunk to the ground.

The assassin fled into the darkness.

CHAPTER XXII.

BRYAN AND JULIUS MAKE A GRAND HIT.

WHEN the Sportive Sport announced to the "Committee" his purpose to prosecute the search alone there was a momentary pause. Then the Handsome Man stepped forth.

"Look a-hyar, gents," he said, "it don't strike me as jest the white thing to leave one man to finish this job. Perhaps thar's some in this crowd that has got business that won't wait any longer. But I know thar's others that hain't got no special call to go home jest yit. Now, I propose to stick to the thing a leetle longer, anyhow. Who's the next lucky man? Don't all speak to onc't!"

Thus appealed to, the mass of the "Committee" still hung back, but one man stepped forward.

"Boss, ye kin count me in," he said.

"Me too," said another.

"I'm with ye—blowed ef I hain't!"

And with like expressions several came over.

"Wal, boss," said the Handsome Man, addressing the Sportive familiarly, "we hain't numerous, but I reckon we make it up in grit. What d'ye say?"

The Sportive Sport ran his eye over the men. They comprised the Handsome Man's ordinary "crowd."

"Ah! a plot to assassinate me!" thought our hero.

Aloud he said:

"You're too few one way of looking at it and too many another. There's not enough to surround the enemy, and there's too many to track them to their hole and then get away for reinforcements without being discovered. I'm much obliged to you, but I reckon I can do better alone."

The Handsome Man saw that he was outwitted, and scowled while he muttered an oath behind his beard.

The Sportive then took leave of the "Committee," and shouldering his rifle, marched off into the wilderness.

He had proceeded scarcely ten rods, when he was startled by a sound near at hand. His first thought was that Spanish Dave or some of his gang had followed him.

But a voice reassured him.

"Don't shoot, Massa Sport. It's only we'uns."

And Julius Cæsar Apollonius Griggs and his compeer, Bryan the Bowld, stepped into view.

"Sure, yer honor," said Pat, "it's the devil's own shame, so it is, to see ye goin' off by yersilf to hunt them spalpeens. Av coorse ye wouldn't take yon omadhoun, that's worse than iver a man o' them, at all, at all—it's the Handsome Man, bad luck to his ugly picter! I mane—av coorse ye wouldn't take the loike av him—an' by the same token the thafe o' the world would be afther murderin' yez in the dizert!—did ye moind the look of 'em I dunno? Well, the long and short of it is, Julius here and mesilf—"

"Yes, Massa Sport, we's gwine 'long wid ye."

"Now, Julius, will ye be 'asy, or will I whelt the face off yez?"

"Dat's all right, Bryan—dat's all right. We's gwine 'long—"

"Yer honor will trate him wid silent contempt, as I do mesilf. He manes well enough; but what wid the ill-manners of 'um he's foriver interrupting his betthers."

"But don't ye give it awa'!" added Bryan, with a sly wink, "he can be kept in his place wid a little severity of manner; an', faith, av we mate annybody, d'ye moind, they'll think we're a couple av gentlemen travelin' wid a colored servant!"

The Sportive smiled.

"You are very kind," he said, quietly, "to furnish me with both a companion and an attendant; but under the present circumstances I should find as little use for the one as for the other. So, with your permission, I beg to decline your offer with thanks, and go on alone."

He bowed and went on, leaving the two to stare after him with open mouths.

Presently Sam began to chuckle:

"Hyah! hyah! hyah! to hyear dat Mick set up fur a gemman! Hyah! hyah! hyah!"

"Arrah, ye divil! But fur the loike av you, wouldn't I be wid um this minute?" cried Bryan the Bowld, in fierce wrath. "Whoo! will I murder yez, I dunno!"

And drawing his rusty horse-pistol, which he had recovered when the stage brought his budget into Idaho, he advanced upon offending Sam with a very warlike front.

In his precipitate flight Sam tumbled heels over head into a bramble-bush, whence he emerged, after considerable thrashing about, not a little the worse for the thorns.

"Fo' de Lo'd, Bryan! don't shoot dis chile!" he spluttered. "Whah you 'specks to die when you go to—hey?"

"Whurroo!" yelled Pat, in great glee. "Luck at the divil run away from an empty pistol! Ha! ha! ha! ha!"

"Ain't dat pistol loaded, Bryan?"

"Loaded, is it? Where would I get the powdher an' balls, widout a cint in me pocket?"

"Den it won't go off, fur sure?"

"Divil a bit."

"It's berry dangerous to carry loaded we'pons, Bryan. Dey might go off an' hurt somebody. Now, ef dat pistol was loaded, I was goin' right home. Ef it ain't loaded, why den it is all right. Now, I tell ye what it is, Bryan, we shouldn't ought to gib up de search fur Massa Haveland—eh?"

"Divil a wan av us?"

"Ef we can't go wid Massa Sport, we kin go wid one another—eh?"

"We're the b'ys that just can!"

"S'pose we go de same way dat Massa Sport went? I reckon he knows de best way—eh?"

"I'm wid ye! Here goes!"

And the two, their animosities all forgotten, trudged off together, Pat taking the lead with a decidedly military air, and Sam making a very respectable rear-guard.

All that day they wandered at random through the wilderness, subsisting on berries and a bird which Sam killed with a stone, and which they boiled over the fire for their evening meal.

In the morning they started again, without breakfast. An anxious look was on the face of each, but neither made any reference to its cause.

As the day advanced they became less and less talkative, until they had gone for an hour or more without exchanging a word.

The sun was already past the meridian when Sam stopped short, and asked:

"Bryan, whah is we?"

"Faith! we're right here!" replied Bryan o' Balleyhoolagan with an affectation of humor.

"Bryan, I reckon we're worse lost dan Massa Haveland."

"Troth! it's no lie ye're tellin'!"

"I's drefful hungry!" murmured Sam, plaintively.

"Be me sowl! I'm that same."

"I reckon we can't find Massa Haveland."

"Divil a man av us!"

"De hull crowd guv' it up."

"They did."

"S'pose we go home?"

"Show me the way!"

Then there was a dead silence.

Sam looked wistfully around, and even up at the sky.

After a long pause, he asked, reflectively:

"Was it Jeremiah or Elijah dat de ravens fed?"

"I never knew ayther of them," replied Pat. "Annyways, the ravens won't feed the loike av us."

"Dat's so!" admitted Sam, disconsolately, as if he was sorry that the day of miracles was past.

They were standing just at the foot of a precipitous escarpment.

At this moment a rifle-shot was heard above their heads, followed by a cry, and some heavy body came tumbling and crashing through the tough bushes that grew on the face of the cliff, lodging almost at their feet.

"Fo' de Lo'd!" cried Sam, in abject terror, and dropped upon his knees, with clasped hands.

"Divil swape me, but it's the Spoortive Spoort!" cried Bryan the Bowld. "They've kilt him intirely."

"De Sportive?" echoed Sam, greatly relieved, and would have gone to the body, but Bryan dragged him back, muttering:

"Whisht! D'ye moind above?"

Sam peered through the foliage of the underbrush and saw a head thrust over the edge of the precipice.

It was the Handsome Man!

Spanish Dave had returned and searched for the man he hated, until he found him standing with his back toward him. At so fair a mark he had fired, and seen the man throw up his arms and disappear from sight.

Going up to the spot, he found that his victim had been standing on the verge of a precipice, over which he had fallen.

The dense undergrowth below hid the body, and to reach the spot where it had fallen the murderer had to make a long detour, which cost him half an hour.

When he reached it the body was not to be found! Though he searched till dark, he found no trace.

Spanish Dave returned to Idaho with a terrible uncertainty in his mind. If the Sportive had had strength to escape, had he recognized his cowardly assailant when the latter looked over the cliff?

Of Pat and Sam the Handsome Man, of course, knew nothing.

No sooner was the head withdrawn than they went to the body.

The Sportive lay unconscious, bleeding from a wound in the back and a cut on the head which he had evidently got in falling.

"Poor divil! that's the time he got a hard knock," exclaimed Pat, emphatically.

"But he ain't dead yet. See! he's a-breadin'!" cried Sam.

"We must get him out o' this, annyways. That murderer above will come down and finish him."

"Hyere, put him on my back," said Sam.

This was immediately done, and so the Sportive was borne out of the clutches of his cowardly foe.

By taking turns they carried the wounded man for hours, until in their weakened state for want of food they were thoroughly exhausted. Then Sam suddenly cried:

"Look, Bryan! D'ye see dat hill dah? Well, dat's de way home. We can't carry dis gemman any further. S'pose we leabe him hyere, tell we go fur help?"

This was agreed upon, and leaving the wounded man under some overhanging rocks, they set out.

In an hour they again realized that they were lost. Then came a new terror. There were men in their vicinity!

Thinking that they were pursued by the Handsome Man, they fled. They were discovered and pressed hotly. A watercourse seemed to offer the only chance of escape. Indeed they were fairly driven into it.

Five minutes later they stood before the black mouth of the tunnel which formed the gateway of the Death Riders' retreat.

The sound of their pursuers coming down the watercourse forced them to enter, though Sam's knees smote together and his eyes rolled with terror, as his superstitious fancy peopled the darkness with unearthly shapes.

No sooner had they entered than they were called to surrender by an unseen guard.

Sam fell upon his knees with a piteous appeal that his life be spared.

When they were surrounded by the Death Riders, Bryan said:

"Faith, gentlemen, we capitulate, av yez leave us our side arms."

Pat and Sam had penetrated to the robbers' stronghold, and, having succeeded, they heartily wished they hadn't!

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE CAPTAIN'S PURPOSE.

THE Hell-cat had watched Stella with a vigilance worthy of her name. She had seen her leave the house, and, from a fiendish desire to witness the carrying out of her plot, had followed her, throwing over her own head, as a precaution against neuralgia, the first thing that came to hand, which happened to be Stella's shawl.

The girl passed round the house and down the road; and fearing lest this opportunity should be lost, the Hell-cat hastened to inform the Handsome Man, not thinking, in her eagerness, of the danger to which the shawl might expose her.

Had the Handsome Man been even more deliberate, in the semi-darkness the shawl might have deceived him. Blinded by passion as he was, the shawl was to him as a red rag to an angry bull.

Only when Californy Sal pronounced his name did he discover his mistake; and then the fear of her vengeance made him resolve to silence her in anticipation.

Meanwhile, Stella hastened on until she saw a man answering the description of Old Red Eye.

"Did you bring this note?" she asked, hurriedly.

"Yes, Miss Raymond."

"And my guardian?"

"I will take you to him, if you are ready."

"I am ready. Go on."

"Where is the Sportive?"

"I do not know. I must go alone."

At this instant there was a violent struggle near at hand, and the voice of Old Red Eye cried:

"Villains, unhand me! I will defeat your hellish plot!"

There was a dull thud, a groan, and a fall. Then dead silence.

An oath escaped the captain in his natural voice.

The girl started, gazed at him, and uttered a low, tremulous cry.

"Oh! I am betrayed!"

For an instant she was bereft of strength, and seemed about to faint.

In that instant a cloak was thrown over her head, and she found herself in the gripe of a man to whose strength her wildest struggles were nothing.

"Cleverly done!" exclaimed the captain. "For the address with which you have redeemed the situation I will forgive your neglect to gag that old bummer. Is he secure now?"

"Yes."

"Come on, then."

The captive was borne to where horses were tied, and so to the Death Riders' stronghold.

Once in the hut which the captain made his headquarters, Stella was set free.

"Miss Raymond," he said, with affected deference, "I have no desire to be unnecessarily severe with you. If you wish it, your guardian will be shown into your presence."

"David Arbuckle," exclaimed the girl, passing over his proposal, "what is the meaning of this outrage?"

The man laughed a little uneasily.

"I see that you recognize me," he said.

"Yes, I do. And again I ask—what is the meaning of this outrage?"

A flash of defiance came into the captain's eyes.

"It means that I have ceased to be your suitor. I now am in position to coerce your will."

"So from a villain who was once held in check by a wholesome fear of the law, you have turned into a mountain bandit?"

"Yes," he said, drawing himself up proudly. "Here there is no appeal from my will! Here I am king!"

The girl looked at him steadily for a moment, and then said:

"Just now you remarked that I might see my guardian. If you will relieve me of your presence and send him instead, the change will be very grateful to me."

Flushing slightly, the captain bowed and withdrew.

The meeting between guardian and ward was affecting in the extreme.

Old Jasper Haveland was pale with anxiety. When he folded his ward in his arms he bowed his head on her shoulder in speechless woe, trembling violently in every fiber of his stout old frame.

The girl clung to him somewhat hysterically, yet striving to maintain her composure.

"They were left undisturbed until afternoon, when the captain again made his appearance."

Old Jasper Haveland, holding his ward in his arms as if to protect her with his life, gazed defiantly at their captor.

The captain seated himself with an air of insolent unconcern, throwing his leg over the arm of his chair, and striking his boot with a riding-whip.

"A week ago," he began, addressing Mr. Haveland, "you were curious to know why I had brought you here. I am now come to tell you."

He paused, but there was no reply.

Mr. Haveland stared at him like a lion that was about to spring.

Stella sought to soothe her guardian, whispering in his ear:

"Do not anger him. We are hopelessly in his power, and I know that he can be terribly cruel, if aroused."

"My dear sir," pursued the captain, "an inscrutable Providence has seen fit to order that 'unto him that hath it shall be given, and from him that hath not shall be taken even that which he hath.'"

"It would be unbecoming in us poor mortals to question the justice or propriety of this. It is enough for us that it has been decreed. It remains for us to conform our action to the existing state of things."

"Now, sir, you, with no very conspicuous merit, have been marked out as one of the lucky ones. I, on the other hand, for no fault that I can discern, have always been classed with those who 'have not.'"

"But, sir, this is a world of change, and victory usually goes over to him of the longest head and strongest arm. There are some fine-drawn distinctions as to how a fortune may honestly change hands—chiefly entertained, however, by those who have the fortune to lose; but waiving all controverted points, I have brought you here to pump out of you some of the money you have pumped out of the ground, over there in Oil City."

"I am informed that a certain brother, who came years ago to push his fortunes in the West, would be joint owner with you, were he alive; but I happen to know that he has

balanced all earthly accounts—I don't mind admitting that it resulted from a slight personal difficulty with myself.

"On his demise you became sole possessor; and, Miss Raymond being your legatee, we come to the reason why I brought *her* here.

"You may or may not know me as a quondam suitor for your ward's hand. She carried herself with a very high-and-mighty air, not giving me the chance to consult you in the matter; so that unless she boasted of her conquest, you may not know how far matters went between us.

"I loved her then, and time and change have wrought no abatement of my passion. Then and there my enjoyment of her favor depended wholly on her sweet will. Now and here my acquisition of her person, at least, whatever can be said of her affections, depends simply upon my disposition and ability to get and hold possession of her.

"In the past she exercised her will. In the present I mean to enforce mine to the fullest extent.

"I think that is clear to the most ordinary apprehension!"

He paused and glanced at his auditors.

Mr. Haveland was glaring at him steadfastly, his breast laboring with deep inhalations, his arms straining his ward in an almost painful embrace.

Stella, shrinking and shuddering with dread, had her face hidden in his neck.

"The Rev. Thomas à Becket Wharton next claims our attention," pursued the captain. "I have brought him that, by the *forms* of law, at least, I may bind the lady to myself until death do us part; and having accomplished this purpose, I promise you that I shall hold on to so much of her as is tangible with a grip that only death itself shall loosen!"

"No, by Heaven!" cried old Jasper Haveland, sweeping his ward aside and leaping up. "A just God will never permit such an enormity! I am the instrument appointed to crush the viper who has outraged Heaven with his insolence and blasphemy! Die, wretch!—*die!*"

Taken unawares, the captain was borne to the floor before the stout old hero's irresistible assault, and felt his throat clasped as in iron bands.

Terrified out of all presence of mind, Stella began to scream at the top of her voice.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A MAN WITH HIS PRICE.

As the captain saw the old man coming, he had just time to execute a shrill whistle before "his wind was cut off."

It was sufficient, however. Almost instantly several of his men burst into the room.

The first efforts to drag old Jasper Haveland from his hold failed; but a ringing thump on the head with the butt of a pistol knocked him senseless, and his relaxed fingers were then removed from the captain's throat.

The younger man was purple in the face with suffocation and chagrin, as he rose again to his feet.

"Bind him in that chain!" he ordered

It was done.

"Leave the room!"

They went.

Stella was in a swoon.

The captain restored her to consciousness with the usual remedies.

On recovering, she started from his arms with a shudder.

He scowled angrily, and muttered with an oath:

"Go on! go on! I'll have all our lives to take it out of you!"

The girl passed to her guardian's side, and succeeded in restoring him to consciousness.

"I had nearly done," said the captain, coolly, "when your unceremonious interruption came. As for your instrumentality in vindication of the Deity, I think you will concede that there is some mistake about that.

"I have only to add that the marriage ceremony will take place this afternoon, at sunset. Until then, allow me to bid you *adieu!*"

He bowed with mock courtesy and withdrew.

Stella hastily unbound her guardian, and then wept in his arms.

Tears trickled down the old man's beard and fell upon her hair as he stroked it affectionately.

"My pet," he murmured, "what can I do?—how can I save you?"

He was utterly powerless!

Toward the middle of the afternoon our humble friends, Pat and Sam, presented themselves; but before we introduce them here, let us see what they had been doing.

The first terror of capture being over, and the Death Riders showing no disposition to treat them harshly, the prisoners soon regained their wonted equanimity.

By their oddity of character they offered a new diversion to the men, whose amusement was for the most part limited to gambling; and before half an hour they were on good terms with every member of the band.

Such dancing as they executed was never seen before; and their propensity to quarrel being discovered, the men soon had them at loggerheads, the absurdity of which afforded the spectators endless amusement.

But on one topic the comrades were a unit. They never tired sounding the praises of their master, bluff and crabbed old Jasper Haveland.

As presented in their glowing account, his wealth and magnificence of living became fabulous.

Among their auditors was a man who listened in silence, only his rapid breathing and the avaricious glitter in his eye betraying how deep an interest he took in what was said.

Later he approached Pat and Sam when they were alone.

"Look a-hyar, strangers," he said, cautiously. "I reckon you stand by the old party in the shanty yonder?"

Pat scratched his head in a bewilderment which he would not acknowledge.

"Yis—yis," he said, hesitatingly. "Faith, I b'lave yer honor."

"Kin you keep a close tongue in your head?"

"Is it a tongue? Divil a wan av us would fail in that same."

"Dis chile keep him tongue in him mouf fur shore."

"Look a-hyar, pards, I'm goin' to show ye my hand, an' ef ye split on me, I'll give ye the length o' that!—d'ye onderstand?"

And the robber showed his bowie-knife, threateningly.

His auditors were not a little disturbed.

"Why would we split yez, I dunno?" asked Pat.

"That's all right," said the road-agent. "Ef ye don't go back on me, I'm all friendly. Now, ef ye could git the old gent off, would ye do it?"

"Av coorse."

"Dat's jes' what we're hyere fur."

"S'posin' somebody was to help him out o' the scrape—mind I don't say who—would he come down handsome with the rocks?"

"Rocks?" repeated Pat. "Yis, if it wasn't for the rocks, sure, we'd have no difficulty in running away."

"You don't understan'. Would the old party ante up the skads—stamps—spondoolicks—the filthy, ye know?"

"Yis—yis. Faith it was a filthy trick to—"

"Cheese it! Would he sugar up, generous?"

"Sugar?"

Pat was in hopeless bewilderment.

The road-agent frowned impatiently, and next spoke with the deliberation of a man greatly annoyed.

"How—much—money—would—he—put—in—the—hand—of—a—party—who—would—help—him—out—of—his—and—"

"Oh!" cried Pat, with sudden intelligence. "Begorra! yer fortune would be made!"

"Ten thousand, fur instance? It's a blasted big risk."

"Make it five!" cried Pat, growing suddenly cautious.

"Look a-hyar, cully," said the road-agent, "go to the old party and tell him if he's got ten thousand in hard money that's layin' 'round loose, and will guarantee not to blow on me, I'm the man that'll show him a straight road to Idaho."

"Does ye' clude me an' Bryan in dis hyar arrangement?" asked Sam.

"Of course."

"Den 'sider dat done!"

This was what our two humble friends had accomplished; and when they were admitted to Mr. Haveland's presence they laid the proposition before him, making it appear, however, that their sagacity had picked out the man, and that, in fact, their coming to the robbers' stronghold was for this very purpose.

"Tell him," said old Jasper Haveland, promptly, "that

the man who places my ward and me in safety in Idaho shall be richer by twenty thousand dollars."

"Yes," interposed Sam, quickly—"an' me an' Bryan, too."

So the diplomatists went forth to complete negotiations with the disaffected robber.

As the sun approached the horizon the captain entered.

"If you have any preparations to make for the approaching ceremony," he said to Stella, "you have fifteen minutes at your disposal. At the end of that time the minister will be in attendance."

CHAPTER XXV.

REV. THOMAS A BECKET WHARTON.

At the end of the stipulated time several of the outlaws entered the room, and with them came the minister, looking pale and care-worn, yet resigned.

"You sent for me, sir?" he asked, meekly.

"Yes," said the captain. "There is a little ceremony to perform, which is in your line."

"May I ask its nature?"

"Certainly. This lady and myself are to be united in marriage."

Stella shrunk closer in her guardian's arms, with a suppressed cry.

The minister started and looked from the robber chief to his intended victim.

"I beg your pardon! Did I understand you aright?" he asked.

"Didn't I speak plainly, sir?" demanded the captain, impatiently. "Is there anything startling in the idea of marriage?"

"May I venture to ask—is it the lady's wish—"

"No, by Heaven!" cried old Jasper Haveland, hotly. "Does the dove mate with the rattlesnake? Do angels wed with devils like him?"

The captain smiled, quietly.

"It is *my* wish," he said.

"Sir," said the minister, "such a marriage is impossible. It would have no legal force."

"It will stand the test of law here, where I rule," said the captain. "Do your part now, and I will look out for the future."

"You cannot expect me to so pervert the high calling to which I have devoted myself. By so wicked an act I should betray the church whose holy sacraments have been intrusted to my keeping, and insult the Master who claims my reverence."

"I did not expect to bring you into this arrangement without the regular allowance of cant," said the captain. "Go ahead; when you have fired off all your pious squibs let me know, and then I will have my say."

"You have my answer, sir," said the minister, with a quiet dignity which made even Stella look up from her guardian's shoulder. No one had supposed him possessed of so much stamina.

"Well," said the captain, "here are my arguments."

As he spoke he threw a coil of rope on the table, and laid his revolver and bowie-knife on it.

The minister turned pale as he looked at them, but his purpose showed no indication of wavering.

Stella gazed as if fascinated.

Jasper Haveland awaited the issue breathlessly.

The outlaws stood round like statues.

"They have this peculiarity," pursued the captain, deliberately—"before the loftiest flights of eloquence, the most cogent deductions of logic, they stand unanswerable. The sage philosopher, the wily diplomat, the sophistical priest, the learned expounder of law, are all confounded by the one syllogism which admits of no debate—I can compel, if I will; I will to compel; hence, it must be done!"

"Sir," replied the minister, unabashed by the heartless parade of the man who held his life in his hands, "you commit a fallacy as old perhaps as the world, by losing sight of that moral force to which the all-wise God subordinated all the powers of this world. As it triumphed on Calvary so will it triumph to the end of time!"

"Do I understand you to refuse to obey my command?"

"Yes."

"At the peril of your life?"

"You may kill the body. The soul is amenable only to God."

The captain stared at this man who had developed such unexpected strength of character.

Old Jasper Haveland arose to his feet, advanced and grasped the minister's hand.

"I have seen men whose pride enabled them to face death," he said, "but you are the first in my experience to offer himself a martyr to moral principle. I bow in acknowledgment of the Power that sustains you."

The captain shrugged his shoulders.

"He's a mule for meekness and obstinacy," he said. "But I can't help respecting him more than I did. However, we'll test his pluck. Here, somebody! Tie him up by the thumbs."

An outlaw stepped promptly forward. It was the man who had offered to betray his chief for old Jasper Haveland's gold.

"Ah! Rigwell," said the captain, "take him off. We'll see how he feels in the morning."

"Come along!" said Rigwell, seizing the divine by the shoulder and forcing him forward, roughly.

"My dear friends," said the captain, when he had left the room, "the ceremony is postponed until to-morrow, on account of the indisposition of our dear brother Wharton."

"Madam, it pains me that your impatience to become my wife should be thwarted; but we must all bow to the inevitable. Our union, when it is consummated, will be all the sweeter because of the obstacles we have had to overcome. Until to-morrow, adieu!"

And bowing in mock courtesy he withdrew, taking his fellows.

Once more alone with her guardian the unhappy girl wept in his arms, shivering with dread foreboding.

The unexpected stand of the minister afforded her a respite from the awful peril that menaced her. But even if he remained steadfast, would it make any material difference in the purpose of the robber chieftain?

Knowing the early passion the man had conceived for her she felt that he was as much resolved upon the possession of her person as upon the acquisition of her guardian's money.

Then her thoughts turned to the Sportive Sport. What was he doing? Why did he not come to her rescue? Had he returned to Idaho and learned of her abduction? If he was only near her, she felt that she would be safe.

In such a state of suspense sleep was impossible, and guardian and ward remained talking in low tones and trying to console each other.

It was long after midnight when they heard a low scraping sound followed by a hiss. This was repeated several times, until their attention was attracted to the doorsill. Then a paper was thrust into the room.

With her heart in her mouth, Stella advanced and picked it up. In pencil were traced the words:

"Everything is fixed. douse yer lite. git reddy to Git at a minnit's Notice. lay low tell I come fur ye."

The girl reeled with sudden faintness.

Was rescue really at hand?

CHAPTER XXVI.

AN INTERCEPTED FLIGHT.

OLD Jasper Haveland sprung forward and caught his fainting ward.

"What is it?" he asked, anxiously.

Silently—she could not speak—she placed the paper in his hand.

In an instant his eye mastered the scrawl.

"My darling!" he murmured, clasping her in his arms. "God has sent a deliverer!"

Instantly he extinguished the light, and then hand in hand they waited in the darkness.

After a short interval they heard the door open softly, and the form of a man was dimly distinguishable in the doorway.

"Air you ready?" he asked, in a whisper. "Come."

With fluttering hearts and trembling limbs they followed him.

All around was as silent as death.

Like shadows they stole away from the huts.

Presently their guide uttered a low hissing sound.

"Is that yer honor, Master Rigwell?" asked a well-known voice, in a whisper so hoarse as to be incautiously loud.

"In the fiend's name, keep that barn-door shut!" admonished the traitor outlaw, nervously.

"Is it a barn-door?" asked Pat, innocently.

"Dry up, ur you'll have the hull band down on us!"

The next instant Stella had clasped the hands of her humble friends.

The Rev. Thomas à Becket Wharton too was of the party.

"Here," said Rigwell, "are weapons and ammunition. Help yourselves."

Old Jasper Haveland availed himself of the means of defense without further urging.

"Now there will be some blood spilled before I am captured again," he said, and turning to the minister:

"Will your scruples stand in the way of your using the weapons that God himself has put in our hands?"

"I would hesitate to use the instruments of death until the provocation were very great," said the minister; "but where innocent lives and the honor of women are at stake, I think we are justified in repelling the assailant as if he were a beast of prey."

"I like that part of your doctrine, at any rate, boss," said the outlaw. "Ef we git in a tight fix—and we may before we git through with it—and you think prayin' an' psalm-singin' will help the thing along any, why throw that in too, but don't furgit to shoot."

"Look hyar, Massa Rigwell," said Sam, "is dem t'ings loaded?"

"You bet they air, shady!"

"Den dey may go off?"

"That's what they're made fur."

"Tell ye what it is, sah—don't ketch dis chile handlin' dem debil's fixins'. Ugh—ugh! Ef dey done gone bu'st, whah dis chile go to—eh?"

"Aw! hark till the like av him!" cried Bryan the Bowld, in great disgust. "Faith, he should train on the moor o' Balleyhoolagan a s'ason or two. You may give me a couple o' them, av ye pl'ase, Misther Rigwell."

"Take keer dah, Bryan. Dem hain't like dat ole Rebolutionary hoss-pistol—"

"Arrah! be 'aisy!—"

"Stop your infernal racket! Not a word more out of either of ye."

"Now, sir, are you ready? I have a chum who is the first guard in the tunnel. When we reach him, me and him will go forward and put a quietus on the outer guard. Then the way will be clear."

"Now, forward all, and not another sound!"

Stealthily they began to make their way toward the rock gateway of the robber's stronghold.

Rigwell led the way.

Jasper Haveland and the Rev. Mr. Wharton followed on either side of Stella.

Bryan the Bowld and Julius Caesar Apollonius Griggs brought up the rear.

They had passed perhaps half the distance, and already their hearts began to beat faster with hope, when suddenly there was a sharp report, followed by a cry of pain or terror.

"Oh! Oh! Oh! Oh! Fo' de Lo'd dis chil's a gone 'coon! What I tole you 'bout dat, Bryan? Now you done gone shot me t'rough de shin! I's a-comin', Lo'd! Make room fur dis sinnah in de New Jerus'lum!"

In his pain and terror poor Sam lost all sense of caution and cried out at the top of his voice.

"Arrah! be aisy, ye devil!" shouted Bryan, in no more guarded tones. "Av ye make such a row about it, faith, I'll blow the head off o' yez!"

Rigwell uttered a savage oath.

Turning he grasped Stella by the arm.

"Come!" he said, "the jig's up. We've got to run and fight fur it. Blast them devils! I wish I had the powder to—"

"Good-evening! We seem to have a pleasant party here. Are you out for your health?"

The interruption was in the captain's cool, insolent voice.

He had discovered the extinction of the light in the hut where his prisoners were sheltered, and on investigation had found them gone.

His first movement was toward the tunnel through which they must pass before they could gain the outer world and he was in time to intercept their flight.

With an oath of fear and rage Rigwell turned sharply, dragging Stella with him.

Jasper Haveland and the Rev. Thomas had no option but to follow, though they were now going back over the course they had come.

Bryan the Bowld who, fortunately for them perhaps, had dropped his unlucky weapon immediately after its accidental discharge, trudged after them at a pace that needed no goading, while poor Sam was left wallowing on the ground and calling piteously to his friends not to leave him to the Philistines.

And so they regained the hut from which they had set out.

Rigwell was so enraged at the cause of their misfortune that, as the luckless Bryan was about to enter, he hurled him back with an oath, and slammed and secured the door.

"And now," he said, turning to his companions, "there's nothing left but to die fighting. Of course we'll never git out o' hyar alive!"

CHAPTER XXVII

BURNT OUT!

OUR friends were now in a hopeless strait.

Stella sunk despondently into a seat.

Jasper Haveland, the Rev. Mr. Wharton, and the outlaw, Rigwell, faced each other.

"We have plenty of ammunition," said the first, in gloomy desperation. "If we cannot escape with our lives, we can at least cost our enemies dear."

"Thar's only one way," said Rigwell. "We three are booked, sure. If you would save the woman's honor, you must kill her with your own hand, or give her the means of putting herself out of the way. Here, ma'am, is a pistol that'll do the job fur ye when we git at the last hitch."

"Stop," said the minister, taking the weapon from his hand. "That is a false theory, whose origin is lost in antiquity, and which has been a pet hobby of novelists perhaps from the beginning of romance writing. But if there be any sin against which Christianity sets its face determinedly, it is suicide. While you have the right to protect yourself from great injury even to the taking of the life of the assailant, no consideration under Heaven will justify self-destruction to escape any calamity sent or permitted by the Father, without Whom not a sparrow falls to the ground!"

The outlaw stared at the minister. Like the majority of people, he accepted his morality as it was cut and dried for him by public sentiment.

Jasper Haveland's face was distorted by a spasm of pain.

"In a case of such terrible moment to the woman," he said, at last, "I would not dare to assume the responsibility of deciding for her. Stella, my darling, I trust to your pure heart to decide what is right for you to do."

The girl was greatly affected. Throwing her arms about her guardian's neck, she said:

"Dear guardie, you are always good to me. You will not misconstrue my motives? You will not think that I am led by a fear of death to prefer the terrible fate that awaits me if I fall again into the hands of our enemy? But, dear, I sincerely believe that Mr. Wharton is right. I have no right to sin in order to escape suffering."

The old man sobbed as he pressed her to his heart.

"God's blessing on you, pet!" he said, "I believe that you have decided aright."

The girl took up the weapon.

"If I am compelled to use it," she said, "I will do so without hesitation, but not against myself."

By this time the hut was surrounded by the outlaws, and the captain was heard saying:

"My dear friends, since you are so cleverly trapped, you will doubtless see the folly of further resistance. If you yield at once, we will all forget your little escapade."

"Here is an opportunity for you to secure your own safety," said Jasper Haveland to Rigwell. "I thank you for your assistance, and will, if I have ever the opportunity, reward it. You can be of no further use to my unfortunate ward and me. Do not let us compromise you further."

"And you, Mr. Wharton, may be restored to freedom, when you are of no further use."

"For myself and ward death is preferable to the fate which would await us in his hands."

"I elect to stay with you," said the minister, quietly. "No consideration of personal safety would induce me to desert a lady so menaced as Miss Raymond. Even if it is productive of no good, we can resist to the last."

"Boss," said the renegade outlaw, "the long-short o' the matter is jest this hyar; ef I kin only git a shot at— Ah!"

His pistol went up and exploded instantly. Being at such short range, the pane of glass through which he fired was shattered. There was a sharp cry of pain followed by a savage oath.

"I've plugged the cap'n. Ef it'll only let his soul out, I'll throw up my hand fur the rest o' the game content."

Next came a hoarse command: "Riddle that shanty with bullets!"

Jasper Haveland comprehended the danger, and with a quick motion dragged his ward to the floor, as a volley of pistol-balls swept the room, shattering the window and splintering the door. Mr. Wharton uttered a low ejaculation.

"Are you hurt?" asked Mr. Haveland, anxiously.

"I think a ball has gone through my left arm."

"Then you're hunk to pay 'em back. Now's our chance. Do you see them figur's? Fire!"

Then began a warfare in which those outside the house fired at random, while those within directed their aim by the flashes of their enemies' weapons.

"Curse you! you are accomplishing nothing. Burn the shanty about their ears!" soon ordered the captain.

"The jig's up!" said Rigwell. "Twenty minutes will git us ready fur a first-class funeral!"

In a few minutes an ominous crackling sound announced the assault of an enemy before which they were powerless. Outside, the trees were illuminated. Inside, white curls of smoke began to creep through crevice and cranny like serpents.

"Shall we stay in this smoke-house and roast, or make a run for it?" said Rigwell.

"It is our one chance of life," answered Mr. Haveland.

"Don't call it that. We're booked, sure. We have a choice as to the how—that's all. Come! let us start."

Stella was already coughing violently. She grasped her guardian's arm with a trembling hand.

Rigwell hurled the door open, and the four started at a run.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A TRAITOR'S DOOM.

ALTHOUGH no foe was visible, they knew that they were surrounded on all sides.

They had their pistols in readiness.

"Now!" cried the voice of the captain.

"Guard!—the lariat!" shouted Rigwell, warningly.

There was a hurtling sound, a shadow like a darting bird, and, caught in the same noose, Stella and Mr. Haveland were hurled to the ground.

His weapon was lost. The tough lasso bound him helpless.

Surrounded by enemies, Rigwell fought desperately, until he sunk to the ground severely, if not fatally wounded.

The minister folded his arms across his breast. Although he was very pale and trembled violently, it was plain that a strong moral courage had come to sustain his physical fear.

"Carry me into the open space," came the voice of the captain, in hoarse command.

He appeared, seated in a chair, and borne by two of his men.

His shirt was torn open and stained with blood. A bandage could be seen about his body. He had evidently been wounded in the breast.

"Ah, my friends!" he said to his prisoners, "I am glad to see you looking so well. To which of you do I owe this pill that the doctor don't prescribe, and that's so cursed hard to digest?"

"Take that with my compliments in return for your little politeness to me last week," said Rigwell, referring to an insult the captain had put upon him.

"Ah! you're the lucky man?" said the captain, with fierce irony.

"Stand him up against yonder tree."

"I reckon he's too weak to stand, cap'n," said one of the men, with marked deference.

"Hold him up, then!"

And the captain drew his revolver, and measured the distance with his eye.

"Hold on, cap'n," said the man. "I reckon your hand's some unstiddy. I'll fix him so's nobody else won't run no risk o' git-tin' plugged."

"Throw them lariats over them limbs, boys."

Two lariats were thrown over limbs of trees standing at a little distance. The nooses were put over the wrists of the intended victim.

"Now haul away!"

Rigwell was lifted clear of the ground, with his arms extended. The excruciating pain kept him from fainting.

"I've fixed you," he said. "You're welcome to do your worst."

"Men," said the captain, "a traitor is before us. What is the penalty for his crime?"

"DEATH!" came in hollow tones from the men grouped around.

"Is there a dissenting voice to the execution of this penalty on the person of John Rigwell?"

Dead silence reigned.

Deliberately the captain raised his weapon and fired.

The head of the victim fell forward on his breast.

In the center of his forehead was a small perforation.

"Is my hand unsteady?" asked the captain, with a grim smile.

The men stood with their eyes on the ground in awed silence. No one questioned the justice of that execution. They knew that their individual safety depended upon such rigid discipline. Stella had hidden her face in her guardian's breast, to shudder with horror.

"Is he dead?" asked the captain of men who stepped forward to examine the body.

"Yes," was the reply.

"Then chuck him into a ditch."

A shallow grave was dug, and the dead traitor buried like a log.

"Now we renew our allegiance," said the captain.

The men gathered round the mound and swore their usual oath of allegiance to their captain and fidelity to each other, ending:

"As we shall imitate the traitor who lies dead before us, in just execution of our laws, may our fate be like his. *So mote it be!*"

"And now," said the captain, when this ceremony was over, "let us return to a vastly pleasanter business. Parson, are you ready to do your work?"

"If you refer to the unhallowed act required of me yesterday, I still say no."

"Well, it's an old saw that you can lead a horse to water, but you can't force him to drink. I reckon I hain't got life enough in me to wait your motions. So I'll have to go on with the ceremony with another official, and attend to you afterwards."

"Fatty! step to the fore."

As villainous looking an individual as one would meet in many a day's journey, even in the mining country, stepped forth. He owed his sobriquet to his hog-like rotundity of body. He was as filthy as he was fat.

"Cap'n!" he said, making an awkward salute, not unlike a baby elephant.

"Fatty," said the captain, smiling, while he scanned the disreputable person, "it seems to me that I've heard something about your having once been a priest, or a parson, or something."

"Wal, I wa'n't at the head o' the church, exactly," replied Fatty, grinning until his eyes disappeared in his cheeks.

"Deacon?"

"Wal, no—not exactly."

"What then, may I ask?"

"Wal, ye see, I run the fires an' sweepin', an sich."

"Oh! Well, that wasn't *exactly* at the head of the church, for a fact. But I guess you'll do in the present pinch. Out of your ecclesiastical relics have you so much as a Bible?"

"Wal, not a Bible, exactly."

"A prayer-book, perhaps?"

"No, not exactly a prayer-book, neither."

"A hymn-book, at least?"

"Wal, no, cap'n. I reckon I'll have to pass yit. Ye see you hold too high cards fur me."

"What! not a hymn-book, even? Well, what have you got, pray?"

"Wal, cap'n, ye know I hain't noways proud. Ef it'll be any use to ye, I've got a last year's almanac."

And Fatty shut his eyes and shook all over, while the men guffawed.

"Well, Fatty," said the captain, "like you, I'm noways proud; so in default of something more orthodox, I guess the almanac will have to serve."

The almanac was brought, and the horrible burlesque began.

"Wal, I reckon the first question in order is—has anybody got any objections to this thing? It's put up, or shut up! Don't all speak to once."

Out from among the trees into the light of the burning cabin came a man, who said:

"I object!"

All turned in surprise.

It was Old Red Eye.

His hands were bound behind his back. His hair was matted with coagulated blood, which stained his face and ragged clothes as well.

But the most remarkable thing about the old bummer was that the whole manner of the man was changed.

He spoke with the grave dignity of despair.

Then he turned and looked at the shrinking, shivering girl with a tenderness and remorse that transformed his face.

Helpless as he was, he made no further effort to interfere, but stood gazing at the girl whom he had betrayed into the bandit's power.

Clinging to her guardian, with her face hidden on his breast, Stella did not look up; so that she did not see what struck Mr. Haveland and the captain at the same time.

The former started; the latter uttered an oath.

"Well," he said, "I'll soon cancel your objections, lest Fatty's scruples should stand in the way of his going on with this interesting ceremony."

As he ceased speaking, he raised his revolver and fired.

Old Red Eye turned with a gasp; stared a moment at his murderer; and fell forward on his face.

"Now, Fatty," said the captain, "drive ahead."

"Excuse me!" said a voice near at hand. "This seems to be a festive occasion. Now, I'm full of fun, and on such occasions I am—*always on hand!*"

"THE SPORTIVE!" leaped from more than one bearded lip.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE SPORTIVE STILL "ON HAND."

It will be remembered that the Sportive Sport had been carried to a place of shelter by Bryan o' Balleyholagan and his sable coadjutor and then left while they went for assistance.

At the shock of feeling himself wounded, and turning to see his assassin, the Sportive had lost his balance and fallen over the escairement. It was from the contusion on his head, received in this fall, that he lay so long unconscious.

When he recovered he returned to Idaho, going at once to Californy Sal's saloon, in his anxiety for Stella.

He found Nance in a terrible state of excitement.

At sight of him the girl fell upon her knees, groveling at his feet.

"Kill me! kill me!" she cried, in the wildest abandon. "It'll be all right. I'll never say a word ag'in' it. Jest kill me right n'er, now!"

The heart of the Sportive leaped into his throat.

"What has happened to her?" he asked, hoarsely.

"I don't know. She's gone. And Sal's dead—such a sight you never see! Oh! why don't somebody kill me?"

"Sal dead? Why, how did it all happen?"

"I don't know. She's in there."

The Sportive opened the door to Sal's room.

A motionless figure was outlined beneath the sheet.

He drew down the sheet from the face, and started back with an ejaculation of horror.

"Who did this?" he asked.

"I'm almost afraid to tell you," moaned Nance.

"Tell me at once! See that you keep nothing back."

Then Nance told of the plot to disfigure Stella, and the accident which brought retribution on its devisor, as she had learned it from Sal's lips just before she died.

"I hain't told nobody but you," she concluded. "I was afraid the Handsome Man would kill me."

Nance had stood in fear of the Handsome Man ever since his deadly assault upon her.

Through Rooty, the Sportive learned of the note he had handed to Stella.

"I never lost sight of her but that one minute," said Nance, deprecatingly. "When she walked back o' the house I always watched her on the quiet. But just then Natty Milliken called me, and she slipped out."

Just then Natty Milliken came to the door of his room. He was up and dressed.

"Mr. Gary, will you step this way? I heard your voice; and I reckon I kin be o' more sarvice to ye jist now than any man in the mountains."

The Sportive went at once.

He was closeted with Natty perhaps ten minutes.

"Nance," he asked, when he emerged, "have you such a thing as a disguise in the house?"

"Yes," said the girl, wondering—"two of 'em."

"So much the better. Get them at once."

A little later two men left Californy Sal's house in whom no one would have recognized the Sportive and Natty Milliken.

Idaho was excited. A man more or less would have made little difference. But the disappearance of a beautiful young lady and the murder and disfigurement of another already ugly enough, was not a matter of every day occurrence.

Among the loudest talkers was the Handsome Man.

It was toward evening when a couple of strangers joined the crowd in and around the Metropolitan.

Presently the taller one entered into conversation with one of the denizens of the place.

Before long the man started and stared at his interlocutor.

The stranger immediately moved away.

The Idahoan glanced about with an embarrassed air, to see if he had been observed. Then he withdrew from the crowd.

A minute later he joined the stranger in a private room in the hotel.

In five minutes he emerged from the room, and passing through the crowd, spoke in a low tone to perhaps a score of different men.

Each looked puzzled, and, watching his opportunity, slipped away to the private room, to emerge after a few minutes and mingle with the crowd.

In each face there was an expression of wariness, better concealed by some than by others.

At last the two strangers left the room.

They moved carelessly about until they got near the Handsome Man.

Suddenly the taller of strangers uttered a yell.

It was a signal, for in a twinkling five men—the Handsome Man's "crowd"—were knocked down and bound.

Spanish Dave wheeled round in sudden panic.

He saw the stranger, whom he had not noticed before, tear off a false beard and wig and stand forth the Sportive.

"When wanted, I am always on hand!" he cried. "Spanish Dave, your time has come. Defend yourself!"

Like a thunderbolt he leaped forward and clutched the Handsome Man by the throat with one hand, while he deftly dispossessed him of his pistol with the other.

Spanish Dave reached for his bowie-knife in his bootleg; but he was hurled with stunning force on the ground and quickly bound.

The crowd stared.

The Sportive leaped upon the horse-trough in front of the Metropolitan and addressed them.

"Fellow citizens," he said, "we have no time for explanation. You see that this is the work of your Vigilance Committee. Hold these men prisoners, and we may have more to add to the number by daybreak. Now, gentlemen of the Committee, to horse!"

Some of the men who had visited the private room must have been commissioned to get the horses in readiness, for they were now led forward, and the Vigilantes swept out of the town almost before the uninitiated had time to catch their breath.

Natty Milliken (who it need scarcely be said had been a member of the band until he was suspected of treachery, which led to the attempt to stamp him out) showed them where the masks of the outlaws were hidden, and guided them to the water-course by means of which the stronghold was to be approached.

He and the Sportive and four picked men then assumed the masks, so as to personate the Handsome Man and his crowd, which could easily be done in the darkness.

As they approached the tunnel Natty made the usual signal; and in five minutes both of the unsuspecting guards had been knocked senseless and bound and gagged.

Then the rest of the Vigilantes were allowed to approach.

The reader already knows the scene which was engrossing the whole band about the burning cabin.

The surprise was complete.

Before he could use his weapon the captain was disarmed.

"And so you hope to hang me like a dog!" he cried. "See! I escape you thus!"

And he tore the bandages from his body and arose to his feet.

"You've beat me this time, Ned," he said, to the Sportive, with a sardonic smile. "Perhaps it's only fair. I got the other one, you know."

"As for you, my dear," addressing Stella, "I see you go over to the conqueror more readily—"

But a sudden hemorrhage checked his utterance, and he fell to the ground.

Neither Stella nor the Sportive heeded him.

The latter had caught the almost fainting girl from her guardian's breast.

"Are you hurt?" he asked, a great fear and a great tenderness blending in his voice.

"No," she said—"no. And you? Oh! how I have feared for your safety!"

Their eyes met intelligently.

A groan drew the Sportive's attention to Old Red Eye.

"And here is the dog who betrayed her!" he cried, feeling an impulse to stamp the life out of the old bummer.

Not heeding his anger, Old Red Eye said hoarsely:

"Ask her to give me a drink of water."

"What! after your treachery?"

"Ask her to give me a drink of water!"

"Never, you hound!"

"I am dying. As you hope for mercy—ASK HER TO GIVE ME A DRINK OF WATER!"

The earnestness of the old man was terrible.

Stella, who had for a moment gone to her guardian, now returned and heard the voice in which was already heard the death-rattle.

"What is it?" she asked, stooping over him.

The Sportive seized her by the arm.

"Do not touch him!" he cried. "That is Old Red Eye, the man who forged your guardian's writing and betrayed you into the hands of yonder devil."

But Old Red Eye clutched her skirts.

"In the name of God's mercy, give me a drink of water!" he pleaded.

"Wait! I will do so," she said, and sped away.

Returning, she raised the old man's head and held the water to his lips.

"Do you forgive me?" he asked, looking into her face with a terrible hunger that startled her.

"Yes! yes! fully," she said. "Pray drink."

"Thank God!" he murmured, and drank as she bade him.

Then he seized her hand and kissed it, while tears gushed from his eyes.

"Oh, God! can you be less forgiving than my sweet child?" was the cry of the spirit, though no word rose to his lips.

Then, while he gazed at her, the glaze of death settled over his eyes, and he was dead.

No one ever knew that he was the father whose desertion had caused her mother to die of a broken heart. No one ever knew the remorse he had suffered upon learning that he had betrayed his own daughter into the power of her deadliest foe.

But now he was dead, not shadowing her life with his secret.

Tenderly, though not knowing him from an utter stranger, the girl disengaged the clasp of his cold fingers. Afterward, at her request, he was buried decently.

Jasper Haveland's brother, the quest of whom had brought Stella and her guardian to that wild country, was indeed dead. But when it was discovered that the Sportive Sport was his son, Stella's heart gave a great bound, and the blood streamed all over her face and neck in a burning flush, while Jasper Haveland grasped him by the hand with emotion too deep for words.

Of course he accompanied them back to the States, leaving Nance and Rooty to run the saloon lately owned by Californy Sal, the Hell-cat, and the Vigilantes to mete out speedy justice to the road-agent band.

Bryan the Bowld, o' Balleyhoolagan, and Julius Caesar Apollonius Griggs, Esq., also returned to the haunts of civilization, where they never wearied of recounting their redoubtable exploits and hair-breadth escapes. Sam had one advantage—he could point to the wound in his leg, in confirmation of his marvelous stories.

The Rev. Thomas à Becket Wharton finds an ample field for his zeal among the rude miners whom he has tried to gather into his fold.

Dear reader, a word in your ear!

When Miss Stella Raymond became Mrs. Edward Haveland you had better believe the Sportive Sport was—"ON HAND!"

THE END.

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